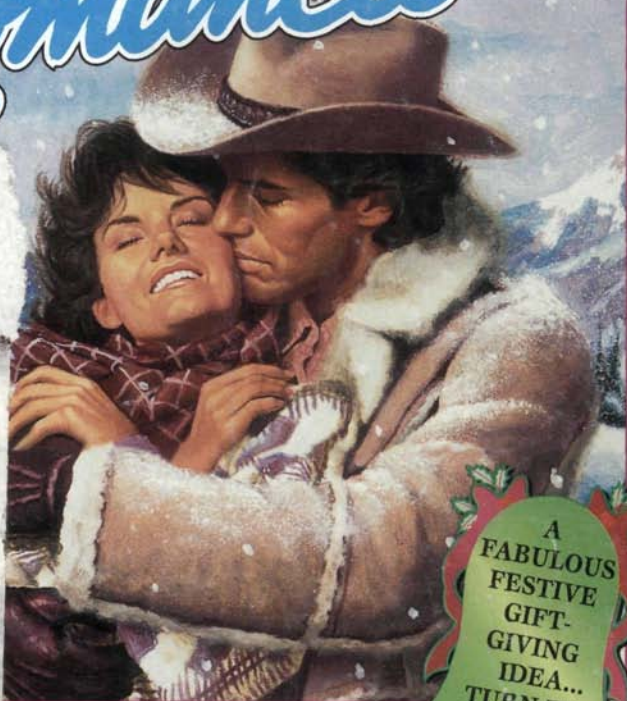


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TURN TO
PAGE 141

Woman Hater
The Story Princess
Christmas Miracle

DIANA PALMER
REBECCA WINTERS
RUTH LANGAN

*A Personal Moment
With Author
Diana Palmer*



*D*ear Reader,

*W*oman Hater is one of my very favorite books. It was dedicated to my father, who was my biggest fan, and he lived just long enough to see it in print. He liked it, even though he wasn't a hunter, and he'd never been to the Northwest, and he wasn't really a he-man. In fact, he was a lot like the brother of the hero in this book, pleasant and mild-mannered and a gentleman.

*D*ad was a college professor and he was brilliant. He could, and did once, build a television from spare parts. He taught physics most of his life, and he understood Einstein's theory of relativity—something neither of his two daughters was ever able to grasp, to his amazement. He always wanted to write fiction, a dream he shared with my madcap mother, who was a nurse by day and a would-be author by night. One of my earliest memories is hearing the sound of the typewriter late at night when they were working on something. They were never able to sell any of the short stories they wrote. But Dad was very happy when I got into print, and he and Mama were proud of me. I think they were as thrilled as I was to see my name on a book cover for the first time.

*T*hey are both long gone now, but this particular book reminds me of them and their unfulfilled dream of publication. I like to think that they know, somehow, that I'm still living the dream for them.

I hope you like reading the book as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Love,

Diana Palmer



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From the desk of
Rebecca Pearson, Publisher



Dear Romance Reader,

The holidays are just around the corner, and we've got some special treats in store for you! The author spotlight is on beloved author Diana Palmer this issue, and she always has a special message for her readers. And we've chosen a special, longer-length Christmas story by acclaimed author Ruth Langan to whisk you away to another time and place. I hope you enjoy this wonderful glimpse into true romance, as well as Rebecca Winters' charming tale....

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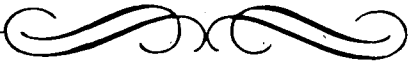
DIANA PALMER

Diana Palmer got her start in writing as a newspaper reporter and published her first romance novel for Silhouette Books in 1982. In 1993, she celebrated the publication of her fiftieth novel for Silhouette Books. *Affaire de Coeur* lists her as one of the top ten romance authors in the country. Beloved by fans worldwide, Diana Palmer is the winner of numerous national bestseller awards. Her next Silhouette Romance® novel will be *Callaghan's Bride*, available in March of 1999. *Beloved* is a Silhouette Desire® title in January, and fans of her Long, Tall Texans series will get a real treat with *Long, Tall Texans: Burke, Regan and Emmett*, in June, and a new collection—*Love With a Long, Tall Texan*—later in the year!



Woman Hater

Winthrop Christopher's distrust of women was as solid as the Montana mountains—until Nicole White arrived, offering him a love as strong as the wind, a passion as pure as snow. But was it enough to turn a grinch into a groom?



When Gerald Christopher first suggested going to his family ranch in Montana to rest his recently diagnosed ulcer, Nicole White had reservations. He was the boss, of course, but she liked the pleasant routine of life in Chicago, where she'd spent the past two years working as a secretary for the Christopher Corporation.

Nicole's family had been one of the old moneyed ones of Kentucky. Her father, in fact, was still a horse-racing magnate. But two years ago, after her mother's death—her father had been with his latest mistress at the time—Nicole had renounced her share of the family fortune. And once her new fiancé, Chase James, had found out that she'd been foolish enough to give up her family money, he'd asked for his ring back. His immediate defection to one of Nicole's moneyed and eligible girlfriends had shattered her young life. At the age of twenty, Nicole had left the elegant brick mansion of her childhood in Lexington, Kentucky, to live the frugal life as a secretary in Chicago.

It all seemed a long time ago now, a part of her life that was like some slowly fading photograph of a reality she no longer belonged to....

"You'll like it there, Nicky," Gerald Christopher said dreamily, staring out the window.

"But your brother and his fam-

ily—won't they mind having your secretary to house and feed?" she asked, her pale green eyes hesitant in a plain but interesting oval face, surrounded by naturally curling short dark hair. She knew he had a brother, and he'd mentioned a woman named Mary, whom she'd assumed was his sister-in-law.

"Winthrop doesn't have a family," he said, smiling as he turned toward her. He was a terrific boss, and Nicky adored him. In a purely businesslike way, of course.

"Your brother came to the office once, didn't he?" she ventured, recalling vaguely a tall, very cold sort of man she'd barely glimpsed on an unusually hectic day.

"Yes," he said. "Winthrop owns a small share in the corporation, and I have an equally small share in the ranch. He's primarily a cattleman, and I'm a businessman, so we each have what we like most. As long as we keep out of his way, we won't have any trouble."

That sounded ominous. "A month is a long time," she said slowly.

"Come on, Nicky, a month in the country would do you good. The ranch is way up in the Rockies, near the Todd place." He paused, glancing at her with an odd expression. "You remember Sadie, don't you?"

"Yes. She was very nice." Mr. Christopher had dated Sadie and had

been devastated when she left several months ago to take care of her invalid mother. Nicole wondered if her boss had more than just health reasons for wanting to work at the ranch. "All right, I'll go," she agreed. "But you're sure your brother won't mind?"

He looked vaguely disturbed for a second. Then he smiled. "Of course I'm sure."

Becky, who worked for one of the vice presidents, breezed into the office after Mr. Christopher had left.

"What's this I hear about a vacation you're taking with the big boss?" she teased.

"I have visions of being eaten by a puma or carried off by a moose," Nicole joked.

"You might be carried off by Winthrop," Becky grinned. "He's a wild man, from what we hear. He used to be a ladies' man, and he traveled in those ritzy circles. But since the accident three years ago, he's pretty much given up his play-boy status and turned to the great outdoors."

Nicole frowned. "What accident?"

"Deanne Sharp—of the Aspen Sharps, and Winthrop's fiancée at the time—was driving and they crashed. He almost lost his leg, and during his recovery, she walked out on him. I hear she's on husband number three now, and has millions," Becky said. "An experience like that could make a man bitter, you know."

Nicole drew in a slow breath. "A real woman hater."

"Now, that's the truth." Becky laughed. "So make sure you take lots of warm clothing. That way you won't get frozen—by the weather or Winthrop."

A WEEK LATER, Nicole and Mr. Christopher flew out to Montana in the corporation jet. The gray jersey dress she wore for the flight, along with a minimum of makeup, made her look sweet and young and totally unlike a glamorous socialite. She stared out at passing clouds, a little anxious about the welcome she was going to get when they got off the plane.

"Mr. Christopher, your brother does know I'm coming?" she asked him when they were about to land.

His dark eyebrows arched. "Of course. Don't worry, everything's going to be fine."

Sure it was. She knew that the instant they got off the plane.

She recognized Winthrop Christopher at once. He was a big man. Broad shouldered and lean hipped with a battered black Stetson twisted into an arrogant slant over one dark eye. He hadn't shaved, and the white line of a scar curved from one cheek into the stubble on his square chin with its faint dimple. His black eyes gleamed with a cold light, and the look he was giving Nicole would have curdled fresh milk.

"Hello, Winthrop," Gerald said, shaking his brother's hand. He glanced at Nicole with a smile, which the older brother didn't return. He was too busy glaring at her,

his dark eyes making an unpleasant inventory of what he saw. "Winthrop," Gerald continued quickly, "this is my private secretary, Nicole White."

"How do you do, Mr. Christopher," Nicole said politely. Wounded man, she thought, even while she wished she could run.

Winthrop's dark eyes narrowed. His thin, chiseled lips pursed thoughtfully, but there was no smile to ease the hardness of that rugged face. His voice was deep and curt. "You're young."

"I'm twenty-two," she said.

"Young." He turned abruptly, with a care that no physically fit man would have had to take. "I'll get the luggage." He started toward the plane, favoring one leg, and Nicole hesitated, her eyes speaking her thoughts. He gave her a look that stopped her from moving or speaking. With a violent flush, she turned away and followed Gerald.

"Not what you expected, Miss White?" Winthrop chided much later as he gunned the truck up what seemed like a mountainside.

"It's very mountainous," she began.

"That it is." He wheeled around another curve, and she got a sickening view of the valley below. Nicole, who had no head at all for heights, began to feel sick.

"Are you all right, Nicky?" Gerald asked with concern.

"I'm fine." She swallowed. Not for the world would she let Winthrop see what his careless wheeling was accomplishing.

Another few miles, and they began to descend. The valley that opened before them took her breath away. "Heaven," she breathed, smiling at maples gone scarlet and gold, delicate aspens and fluffy cottonwoods and the wide swath of a river cutting through it all.

Winthrop's eyebrows levered up a fraction as he slowed the truck to give her a better view. At the end of the road, a huge sprawling two-story house seemed part of its environs.

"Lovely, isn't it?" Gerald sighed. "It's been this way for forty years or more, since our mother planted those maples around the house when our father built it."

"I thought they looked as if someone had planted them," Nicole laughed.

"Amazing, that you were able to pick it out so easily," Winthrop mused, glancing coldly at her.

"Oh, Nicky grew up on a farm, way over in Kentucky," Gerald grinned, tweaking her hair.

"Good thing they plant trees in perfect order in Kentucky, and teach native sons and daughters to recognize the difference between a planted tree and a naturally seeded tree," Winthrop said without looking at her. "I guess there are people who assume God planted them in rows."

That was a dig, and Nicole wondered what the big man would do if she leaned over and bit him. It was incredible how easily this man got through her defenses.

"Did I write you about the Eastern sportsmen I'm expecting?"

Winthrop asked Gerald unexpectedly.

"I remember." Gerald nodded.

Winthrop frowned as he glanced at Nicole, but he didn't say anything. Her name, her last name, rang a bell, but he couldn't remember why. No matter, he thought; he'd remember eventually.

A big, elderly woman came ambling out onto the front porch to meet them. She had high cheekbones and a straight nose.

"That's Mary," Winthrop said, introducing her. "She's been here since I was a boy. She keeps house and cooks. Her husband, Mack, is my horse wrangler."

"Nice girl," Mary muttered, watching Nicole closely as the three newcomers came up onto the porch. "Plain face but honest. Which one of you is going to marry her?" she demanded, looking from Gerald to Winthrop with a mischievous smile.

"I'm Mr. Christopher's secretary, Nicole White," she said quickly, and forced a smile as she extended her hand. "Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm only here to work."

"And that is a disappointment." The woman sighed. "Come. I will settle you."

"Mary is Sioux," Winthrop told Nicole. "And plainspoken. Too plainspoken, at times," he added, glaring at Mary's broad back.

Mary whirled with amazing speed and made some strong gestures with her hand. Winthrop's eyes gleamed. He made some back. Mary huffed and went up the long, smooth staircase.

"What did you do?" Nicole asked, amazed.

Winthrop looked down at her from his great height, his eyes faintly hostile but temporarily indulgent. "The Plains Indians spoke different languages. They had to have some way to communicate so they did it with signs."

"It's fascinating," she said, and meant it.

"If you ask Mary, she might teach you a little." Winthrop smiled with cool arrogance. In other words, that look said, don't expect any such favors from me.

She ran upstairs, careful not to look at him. Winthrop Christopher wasn't going to pull his punches, apparently. Nicole was only sorry that she couldn't dislike him as forcefully as he seemed to dislike her. Quite the contrary; he disturbed her as no man ever had, scarred face, limp and all.

*

THE ROOM Mary led Nicole into was delightful. It had pink accents against a background of creamy white, complete with a canopied bed and ornate mirror.

"Are you sure I was meant to go in here?" Nicole asked hesitantly.

"Mr. Winthrop said so." Mary winked at Nicole without smiling. "With his hands, you see."

Nicole shook her head. "He seems very..." She turned, shrugging as she tried to find words.

"His path has not been an easy

one," Mary told her, those dark eyes sizing her up.

Nicole searched the smooth old face quietly. "He hides," she said perceptively.

Mary smiled. "You see deep."

"I won't hurt him," came the quiet reply.

"I see deep, too," Mary mused. "He won't let you close enough to do harm. But watch yourself. He might take out old wounds on you."

"I'm a survivor," Nicole said, laughing. "I'll manage. But thank you for the warning."

Mary only nodded and left.

Nicole put on a pair of faded jeans and went downstairs. There was no one around, so she went outside and found a comfortable seat on the porch swing. She closed her eyes as the breeze washed around her. Heaven.

"I see you've found the swing."

She jerked upright as Winthrop came out onto the porch. He'd taken time to shave, and his face was dark and smooth now, with the hairline white scar more visible without the stubble of a beard to hide it. Her pale green eyes wandered over him. He looked lean and fit and a little dangerous, despite the faint limp when he moved toward her.

He dropped into a big rocking chair and crossed his long legs. "It's still pretty wild here in the valley. That's why we attract so many bored Eastern sportsmen. They come here to hunt and pretend to 'rough it.'" He glanced down at her. "I hate rich people."

"I'm not rich," she said, and it

was the truth. "But I thought you were."

"Did you?" he asked deliberately, and the mockery in his face was daunting. "Was that why you came with Gerald?"

He moved away from her without another word, almost colliding with Gerald, who was coming out of the house as he was entering it.

"Sorry, Winthrop," Gerald murmured, curious about the expression on his brother's face. "I was looking for Nicky."

"I'm out here, Mr. Christopher!" she called.

"I'm Gerald here," he said shortly, joining her with a resigned glance over his shoulder as the door slammed behind Winthrop. She moved over to make room for him on the swing, and struggled to regain her lost poise.

"I'm sorry Winthrop's so inhospitable." Gerald glanced at Nicole's quiet face. "You aren't afraid of him, are you?"

"I'm not afraid of him," she said. And she meant it. "You must miss all this in Chicago," she said, looking up at her boss.

He stared at a house far on a hill in the distance, his eyes narrowed and unexpectedly sad. "Sadie Todd lives over there," he said absently, "with her invalid mother. We'll have to go and visit her while we're here."

"I'd like very much to go and see her," she said.

He smiled down at her. "You're a nice person, Nicole." He got up. "I'm going to make a few phone

calls. Just sit and enjoy the view, if you like."

"Yes, sir," she promised.

He went inside, and she lounged in the swing until Mary called her to have a sandwich. Then Nicole went out the back door and wandered down to the river, just to look around. She sat down on a huge rock beside the river and tore at a twig, listening to the watery bubble of the river working its way downstream.

"Daydreaming?"

She turned to find Winthrop Christopher sitting astride a big black stallion, watching her.

"I like the river," she explained. "We have one in Chicago, of course, but it's not the same."

"I know: I've been to Chicago. Even to the office." His eyes narrowed. "You don't remember me, do you?"

She did, but it wouldn't do to let him know that. "It's always hectic. I don't pay a lot of attention to visitors, I'm afraid, Mr. Christopher."

"Winthrop," he corrected. "I'm not that much older than you. Eleven years or so. I'm thirty-four."

"How old is your brother?" she asked, curious.

He lifted his chin. "Thirty."

"Sometimes he seems older," she mused. "You inherited the ranch, didn't you?"

He stared at her for a minute, then nodded. "My father knew I'd hold it as long as I lived, no matter what. You'll find that Gerald isn't terribly sentimental. He'd just as soon have a photograph as the object itself."

"I'll bet you saved bobby pins and bits of ribbon when you were a teenager," she said daringly.

He blinked, then laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "I had my weak moments when I was younger," he agreed. "Not anymore, though, Kentucky girl. I'm steel right through."

She wouldn't have touched that line. She turned, glancing at the distant ribbon the river made running into towering, majestic peaks. Winthrop shifted restlessly. "Where's Gerald?"

"Back at the house, I suppose," she said. "He had some important phone calls to make."

"Want a ride back?" Winthrop offered, then seemed to withdraw, as if he regretted the words even as he was speaking them.

"You look as if you'd rather sacrifice the horse than let me on him." She grinned, daring him to mock her. "Anyway—" she shuddered with more sarcasm than he could know, because she'd practically grown up on horses—"I'd probably fall off. It looks very high."

"It is. But I won't let you fall." He kicked his foot out of the stirrup and held down a long arm, giving in to an impulse even he didn't understand. He wanted her closer. He wanted to hold her.

Nicole hadn't realized how intimate it was going to be. His hard arm went around her middle and pulled her back against a body that was warm and strong and smelled of leather and spice. She felt her heart

run away, and that arm under her breast would feel it, she knew.

"Nervous?" Winthrop asked at her ear, and laughed softly, without any real humor.

"Yes, I'm nervous," she said. "You're dangerous."

His eyebrows arched. "You're plainspoken, aren't you?" he asked, gathering her even closer.

"I try to be," she said. She held on to the pommel, her eyes on his long fingers. "You have beautiful hands, for a man," she remarked.

"I don't like flattery."

"Suit yourself, you ugly old artifact," she shot right back.

It had been a long time since anything had made Winthrop laugh. He felt the sound bubbling up his chest, like thunder, and then overflowing. He couldn't hold it back this time, and the rush of it was incomprehensible to him.

The lean arm contracted, and for an instant Nicole felt him in an embrace that made her go hot all over. What would it be like, she wondered wildly, if he turned her and wrapped her up in his embrace and put that hard, cruel mouth over hers...?

"AMAZING, that we worked together for two years and know nothing about each other." Gerald sighed, shaking his head as he and Nicole sat sipping coffee in the living room after supper.

She smiled at him. "You're very nice to work for, though. You don't yell, like some of your vice presidents do."

He laughed. "I try not to. Winthrop, now," he said, watching her face as he spoke, "never yells. He has a voice like an icy wind when he loses his temper, which isn't often."

"He doesn't want me here, you know."

Gerald's shoulders rose and fell. "He's buried himself up here for three solid years. Don't let him hurt you, Nicky."

She colored delicately. "You think he might?"

"I think you attract him," he said bluntly. "And I have a feeling that you aren't immune to him, either."

Hours later, when Nicole went up to bed, she could picture Winthrop behind her closed eyes, and the image made her sigh with mingled emotions. She wanted him in ways that she'd never dreamed she could want a man and she didn't quite know how to cope with the new and frightening sensations.

She was almost asleep when she heard slow steps coming past her door. She knew from the sound that it was Winthrop, and her heart beat faster as he passed her room.

*

THE NEXT MORNING Nicole had finished her two hours in the study, taking dictation from Gerald, and now she was lazing around the corral looking for Winthrop's thoroughbred horses. The stallion was there, but she didn't see the mare anywhere.

A noise from inside the barn

caught her attention. She darted into the dim warmth of the big barn, down the neat corridor between the stalls. "Winthrop?" she called quickly.

"In here."

She followed his voice to the end stall. The mare was down on her side, making snuffling sounds, and Winthrop was bending over her, his sleeves rolled up, bareheaded, scowling.

"Something's wrong," she said, glancing at him.

"Brilliant observation," he muttered, probing at the mare's distended belly with tender, sure hands. "This is her first foal and it's a breech."

Nicole eased into the stall, and gently approached the mare, talking softly to her with every step. While Winthrop watched, she slid down to her knees, watching the silky brown eyes all the while. Slowly she eased under the proud head and coaxed it onto her knees. She drew her fingers gently over the velvety muzzle, talking softly to the mare, gentling her.

"She'll let you help her now," she told Winthrop softly, never taking her eyes from the mare's.

"Yes," he said, watching her curiously for a few seconds before he bent to his task. Minutes later, guided by patient hands, hind fetlocks appeared, followed rapidly by the rest of the newborn animal. Winthrop laughed softly, triumphantly, as the tiny new life slid into the hay.

"A colt," he announced.

Nicole smiled at him over the mare, amazed to find genuine

warmth in his dark eyes. "And a very healthy one, too," she agreed. Her eyes searched his softly, and then she felt herself beginning to tremble at the intensity of his level gaze. She got slowly to her feet.

"The stallion has a superior conformation," she said absently. "So does the mare. He might be a champion."

"The stallion is by Calhammond, out of Dame Savoy," he said, frowning as he moved away to wash his hands. "How did you know?"

"Kentucky is racehorse country." She laughed, sidestepping the question. "I used to beg for work around thoroughbreds, and one of the trainers took pity on me. One of the biggest racing farms in Lexington was near where I lived—Rockhampton Farms." Rockhampton was her grandfather's name; her mother's people had owned the stables for three generations.

"I've heard of it," Winthrop told her after a minute. He turned, staring hard at her with dark, curious eyes. Her name was White. Wasn't that the name of the jet-setting sportsman from Kentucky who was coming with the Eastern hunting party? "The owner of Rockhampton is a White," he said in a direct attack, watching closely for reaction. "Any kin of yours?"

She held on to her wits with a steely hand. She even smiled. "Do I look like an heiress?"

"You don't dress like one," he commented with narrowed eyes. "And I guess you wouldn't be working for Gerald if you had that

kind of money," he said finally, relaxing a little.

"I couldn't have managed that alone," he added quietly. "I'm obliged for the help."

"You don't like me, do you?" she asked a moment later. "Hating me and making my life miserable for the next few weeks isn't going to erase your scars. So can't we be sporting enemies? And I'll promise not to seduce you in the hay," she added, her green eyes twinkling.

"What do you know about seduction, Red Riding Hood?" he asked with blithe humor, and she got a tiny glimpse of the man he'd been before the accident.

"Not much, actually," she said pleasantly, "but that's probably in your favor. Just imagine if I were experienced and sophisticated and out to sink my claws into you!"

Her earnestly teasing expression made him feel as if he were sipping potent wine. He had a hard time drawing his eyes away from her soft mouth and back up to her laughing eyes.

"I don't play games with virgins, honey," he said unexpectedly, catching her chin with a lean, steely hand. "I've forgotten more about lovemaking in my time than you've ever learned, but I'm not low enough to take out my hurt on you."

He was so close that she could feel the strong warmth of him. Her heart ran wild. This was new and wildly exciting, and she wanted more. She took an involuntary step toward him. One slender hand went hesitantly to his chest and pressed

against it, feeling the shock of warm muscle. She felt him tense, even before his hand came up to remove hers with abrupt impatience.

"Don't do that." He ground out the words, glaring at her. "I don't want your hands on me."

Her own forwardness shocked her more than his irritable statement. She turned away, feeling a rush of tears that she couldn't let him see.

"I'd better get back to the house," she said quickly. "I'm glad the mare's okay." She said it all in a mad rush before she ran out of the barn as if her shoes were on fire.

He watched her go with mingled emotions. Anger. Irritation. Hunger. Frustration. He couldn't sort them out, so he didn't bother.

The next few days settled into a pleasant routine. Nicole spent her free time exploring outdoors or watching Mary in the kitchen. Winthrop was pleasant enough, but he kept things cool, although from time to time she found those dark, quiet eyes watching her in a way that excited her beyond bearing.

One morning she heard cattle bawling and excited male voices, and she succumbed to the need to see Winthrop. He was on his horse, helping to drive cattle into a holding pen where they were being vetted. Warmth coursed through her and she forced herself to watch.

Winthrop climbed off the horse to help catch a calf. He was rubbing his leg, and the limp was even more pronounced when he turned, leading his horse by the reins. He saw Nicole at the fence, and he stood very

still for an instant. She could feel his anger even at that distance, and she made a discreet and quick withdrawal, walking quickly into the forest that encircled the house. She stopped, catching her breath. He was right behind her, still leading the horse. As he walked, he favored his right leg.

"Running away?" he taunted. "Why?"

"I don't know," she said quietly.

He lifted his dark head. "Did you want to see if the cripple could still throw a calf?"

She went forward without thinking and put her soft hand over his mouth. She said softly, "You're not a cripple."

The feel of her fingers shocked him. He stood over her, breathing roughly, his eyes dark with pain and anger as they searched hers. "I don't want you here," he said quietly, his eyes narrow, piercing.

"Yes, I know." She touched his cheek, tracing the long scar down his jaw, into the dimple in his chin. It was incredible how secure she felt with him, and not the least bit afraid. He was very close. She could feel the muscles ripple when he moved, feel him breathing, feel the warmth of him in the chill air.

His fingers slid into her hair, feeling the curls as he moved his hands to her nape and turned her head up with firm gentleness.

"It's been one hell of a long time since I kissed a woman," he said half under his breath, looking down at her coldly. "I'm not a boy, and I've gone hungry in recent years.

You could start something that would ruin both our lives."

She looked up at him, unafraid, her eyes soft with understanding and compassion. "I'm not afraid of you," she said softly.

"I could make you afraid, Nicole."

His voice was velvety soft and deep. She wanted his mouth, and her lips parted in subtle invitation. Never in her life had she felt anything as sweet as this.

He looked down at her soft mouth, and something in him snapped. He bent quickly, covering it with his hard lips. She was a child, playing at sensuality, and he wanted to make it so rough that she'd stop tormenting him with emotions he never wanted to feel again....

She yielded completely, no thought of fighting him. His mouth was hard and warm. He made no allowances for her youth, and despite her small experience, this was her first real taste of passion. She sighed hungrily, letting him draw her completely against the powerful hard length of his body, letting him crush her against it. Her mouth yielded eagerly to his insistent lips, tasting his tongue as it pushed into her mouth, penetrating her in a silence that blazed with kindling sensations.

He made a sound deep in his throat and lifted his head, his eyes black and blazing as they probed her dazed ones.

"Aren't you going to fight me?" he taunted with a faint, mocking smile as his mouth poised over hers.

"No." She reached up, sliding

her arms around his neck. Her mouth was soft, parted and waiting, tempting his.

"Nicky..."

It was a groan, her name on his lips. But this time, he didn't try to hurt her. This time, he was achingly gentle. His hard mouth slowed and softened on hers, and he kissed her with a subdued passion that aroused all her protective instincts. She closed her arms tight around his neck and opened her mouth for him, drawing it over his as she was learning he liked it. Her tongue teased at his full lower lip and he made a sound that corresponded with the tautening of his body.

"I'm sorry," she whispered against his lips. "I don't...know much about this. I'm sorry if I did it wrong."

He lifted his head again. He was breathing roughly, and his eyes had a haunted look. "You really are a virgin, aren't you?" he murmured with a tenderness he wasn't aware of. "Why were you watching me?" he asked.

"I needed to," she whispered shakily. "It frightens me."

"It shouldn't." His mouth touched her forehead in a kiss as gentle as the arms that held her. "I won't hurt you again."

She nuzzled her face against him. "It's very exciting, being kissed like that," she whispered shyly.

He smiled. "Is it?" He tilted her chin up and searched her eyes. "Then let's do it again," he whispered into her open mouth.

It was wilder this time, hotter,

more unbearably sweet. She gave him her mouth and melted into the hard contours of his body with a soft moan. It wasn't until she felt the tautening, felt the sudden urgency in the mouth devouring hers, that she realized things were getting out of control.

She put her hands against his wildly thudding chest and pulled her lips away from his. "No," she said shakily.

He bit at her lower lip, his head spinning. "No?"

"I've never...and I can't. I'm sorry," she whispered.

He was breathing roughly, but he didn't seem to be angry. He brushed his mouth over her eyes, closing her eyelids. "What are you so afraid of?" he asked quietly. "It was just a kiss. I didn't even try to touch you in any way that would have offended you."

"It isn't fear," she whispered. How could she explain to him the intensity of her feelings, the aching tenderness she was beginning to feel for him?

"Are you afraid of intimacy?" he asked very quietly.

"I'm afraid of getting involved. Just as afraid as you are," she added.

"Why?"

She touched his face gently, running her fingers slowly along his hard cheek. "I got thrown over by my fiancé," she confessed. "He decided he wanted a rich girl, and I wasn't..." She almost added "any-more" but she caught the word in time.

"You didn't sleep with him," he said, gazing at her intently.

"I wanted the first time to mean something." Intimacy had become as careless as handshakes to her parents, and Nicole had determined that it would be treated more reverently in her own life.

There was more to it than that, Winthrop knew, but Nicole wasn't volunteering any more information. He studied her quietly, thinking how much like him she was. It was insane to be so pleased that she was still innocent. It excited him, as sophisticated women never had.

"I could eat a moose," he said conversationally. "Why don't we rush back to the house and raid the freezer?"

She laughed at him. His humor had surprised her. "Are you walking or riding?"

He grimaced. "I guess I'm riding," he muttered. "Damned leg hurts like hell."

She had a feeling he wouldn't have admitted that to anyone but her. It was the best kind of compliment.

"What happened to your leg?" she asked softly.

"Bone damage and torn ligaments," he said simply. "The surgeons repaired it as best they could, but I'll always limp. And when I overdo, I'll always hurt."

She pursed her lips, feeling mischievous, and almost asked an outrageous question. Then she blushed wildly and turned away.

He guessed the question and burst

out laughing. "No," he murmured. "It doesn't cramp my style in bed."

She gasped, glaring at him. "I never—"

"You might as well have written it in twelve-inch letters on canvas," he retorted.

Her mouth opened, and then closed while she thought up searing retorts, none of which came to mind.

"I'll qualify that," he said after a long exchange of eyes. "I don't think it will cramp my style. I haven't been with a woman since it happened."

Her breath caught, but she didn't look away. It was such an intimate thing to know about him, and she struggled to think of a suitable reply.

"That wasn't fair, was it?" he asked with a slow smile. "And I can't tell you for the life of me why I wanted you to know that. But I did. How about dinner tomorrow night? I'll drive you into Butte."

"If Gerald doesn't need me, I'd love to," she said.

"Okay." He glanced at Nicole, shocked by the surge of jealousy he felt at her remark about Gerald. He was afraid that there was something between this woman and his brother, and his own sense of honor and family wouldn't allow him to trespass on Gerald's territory. He wanted her to be heart-whole. He wanted that desperately. Could she have kissed him that way and still belong to Gerald?

"SADIE INVITED US for dinner Friday night," Gerald said later that

evening as he and Nicole worked in the study. "Is that convenient for you?"

"That's fine," Nicole said. "Winthrop asked if I'd go into Butte with him tomorrow night. To a restaurant."

Gerald pursed his lips. "So Winthrop's out to take my girl away from me, is he? I'm not sure if I like that."

It was an old joke between them. She laughed, and he was smiling. But the man out in the hall didn't see that. Winthrop was within reach of the doorknob, but his lean hand faltered.

"He's not likely to take me away from you, so you can stop worrying," she said, tongue in cheek. "You're quite unmatchedable."

"And Winthrop is too much a gentleman to steal from people, so I can relax."

Winthrop turned and walked out the front door.

The next morning Gerald found a note waiting for him when they sat down to breakfast. He read it over, obviously puzzled.

"Winthrop," he said, waving the slip of paper, "has gone to Omaha. Something about a cattle deal. He said he's sorry about this evening, but he'll have to take a rain check on your dinner date."

"That's all right," she said, hiding her disappointment. "I'm sure he couldn't help it."

"With Winthrop gone, would you rather spend tonight at Sadie's?" Gerald asked with old-world politeness.

She smiled. "You're a nice man. Would you mind?"

"Heavens, no," he murmured.

They went that night to have dinner with Sadie and her mother. After dinner, Nicole visited with Mrs. Todd while Sadie and Gerald did the dishes. Later when Nicole went to say good-night, she found Gerald and Sadie in an embrace that spoke volumes, and the way they were kissing said everything. She tiptoed back and shut Mrs. Todd's door.

"Did you say good-night?" the elderly woman asked Nicole.

"No. They're having a discussion. I expect it will be some time before we hear from them." She smiled and settled back to watch the movie.

LATE THE NEXT MORNING Nicole heard the sound of a vehicle coming up the drive. "Thanks for letting me stay," she told Sadie. "I had a wonderful time."

"I'm glad you came," her hostess mused. "Mother hasn't enjoyed herself much since her stroke. And now I know you aren't making eyes at my Gerald."

Nicole's eyebrows arched in surprise. "You didn't think that?"

"Of course I did," Sadie replied, amused. "So did everybody else."

Nicole wondered then about Winthrop's strange behavior, and if he could have thought the same thing. She looked up as a knock sounded on the door, and Sadie went to open it. It wasn't Gerald standing outside—it was Winthrop.

"Where's Gerald?" Nicole asked hesitantly.

Winthrop positively glared at her. "He's at home coping with some office disaster."

Nicole glared back. He was wearing jeans with a chambray shirt and he looked very Western—deliciously sexy. He was telling Sadie something about a party.

Nicole snapped back to the present. "A party?"

"Gerald thinks you're getting bored," Winthrop told her. "There'll be a band and all the neighbors will come. You too, Sadie. It'll be Friday night, around six. I'll drive Mary up to sit with your mother, and I'll fetch you."

He picked up Nicole's case, and she followed him out to the truck with a rueful wave at Sadie. He didn't speak until they were headed down the long, winding road toward the ranch.

"I didn't expect to find you here," he said curtly.

"It wouldn't have looked right, to have Gerald and me under the same roof alone," she faltered.

He glanced at her. "Then how does it look to have the three of us under one roof?" he shot back.

She hadn't thought about that. She flushed scarlet and moved her gaze out the window. He'd left town because he didn't want to take her out, and now he was as remote as the clouds. She felt abandoned.

"Don't look like that," he said abruptly.

"Like what?" she muttered.

"Lost. Wounded."

She studied her hands in her lap.

"You get under my skin," he said abruptly. "I don't like it."

Her heart shifted uncomfortably. "You have the same effect on me," she said curtly, "and I don't like it, either."

"Then suppose we keep out of each other's way," he suggested.

"That might be wise."

He turned and looked at her just as she lifted her eyes to his. The truck almost went off the road. He braked to stop the truck, but his gaze didn't waver. She was young and sweet and she made him ache as he had in his youth, made him feel invulnerable and all male.

"If I touched you now, there wouldn't be any stopping for either of us," he said in a deep, slow tone. He reached out a lean hand and idly linked her fingers into his with a caressing pressure that was as arousing as a kiss. "I touch you, and my body aches. And if the way you're breathing is any indication, Kentucky girl, you're on fire for me."

She bit her lip, hard. But the tremors wouldn't stop. She tugged her hand away from his and he released it with careless indifference.

"Don't worry," he said with cool mockery, "I love my brother. His happiness comes first."

She frowned slightly. "I don't understand."

"Don't you?" He turned back to the steering wheel and put the truck into gear without another word.

She wanted to tell him that he'd gotten it all wrong, that she and Gerald were only boss and secretary.

But he looked too unapproachable and she wasn't sure of him. Her feelings for Winthrop were new and a little frightening. She didn't want to have to face them.

During the next few days, as she helped Gerald plan the party in her honor, Nicole puzzled over Winthrop's cool behavior.

The night of the party, she dressed carefully in the hated gray jersey and did her face with a minimum of makeup. The band, a very good country-and-western one, was already in full swing when she went to answer the door with Gerald. Winthrop came in behind Sadie, glaring at Nicole and Gerald with cool dark eyes.

"Good evening, Winthrop," she drawled softly as Gerald led Sadie off to the punch bowl, since she was the last to arrive and there were no more guests to receive.

"Good evening, Miss White," he replied. His dark eyes ran down her body like exploring hands, slow and very thorough. He took off his Stetson, settled it on the hat rack, then hung up his jacket.

Watching the muscles ripple under the white shirt he wore, Nicole wanted to stand in his arms and feel him holding her. It was a hunger that bordered on obsession. She moved closer to him as the band swung into a slow dance tune.

"I want to dance," she said quietly, aware of the guests watching them.

He stared her down. "I don't dance anymore," he said coolly.

She moved even closer, her per-

fume floating up into his nostrils, her warmth teasing, seductive. "Hold me, Winthrop," she whispered, laying both palms slowly, hesitantly, flat down over the hard muscles of his chest. "You want to and I want to. Everybody's watching." He started to turn, but she blocked his path. Everyone stopped talking, and she held her breath while he decided.

With a glance behind them and a muffled curse, he pulled her into his hard embrace and began to move very carefully to the slow rhythm of the music.

Nicky savored her small victory, closing her eyes in wonder. Dancing with him was as sweet as she'd imagined it would be. He began to move to the rhythm, a little clumsily at first, but quickly with more and more confidence. She melted into him.

"There," she mumbled happily, "I knew you could."

"I could wring your neck," he said, forcing himself to smile at her while other people joined them on the dance floor. "You're brave in company."

"If we were alone, what would you do to me?" she asked with open curiosity, her green eyes wide and twinkling.

The look in them softened him, just a little. She was a handful, but her heart was in the right place. His fingers edged between hers and caressed them as he turned her with amazing flexibility. He smiled then, the cold anger in his eyes melting into reluctant pleasure.

"What would you have done, Pollyanna, if I'd gone down on the floor with the first turn?" he asked.

"Oh, I'd have made sure I went down with you," she said matter-of-factly, "so that everyone would have thought I tripped you."

He pulled her against him and stood there for one long minute, fighting the urge to kiss her in front of everyone.

"Are we doing statue imitations?" she asked breathlessly.

His lips pursed. "I'm trying to decide whether to kiss you."

"Not in front of all these people, for heaven's sake," she burst out.

"These people—or Gerald?" he asked softly.

Her eyebrows went straight up with surprise. "Well, come to think of it, I'm not sure how he'd react to it," she had to admit.

Winthrop sighed, and drew her back against him. "Never mind, daffodil. Just dance."

All too soon the music stopped, and Gerald was there, waiting.

"My turn." He grinned. "Sorry, big brother."

Winthrop stared at his brother for a long minute, searching the younger man's eyes curiously. And for just a minute, he thought about refusing. Then he came to his senses. She was just a woman, for God's sake. If Gerald wanted her, he could have her, Winthrop thought angrily. He smiled, but there was no humor in it. He nodded with a mocking smile at Nicole and then walked slowly away to the punch

bowl, pausing to talk to some of the other men on the way.

Winthrop didn't dance with her again, but Nicole felt his gaze on her wherever she went. Her eyes were on him just as much, when she thought he wasn't looking.

All too soon, the guests were leaving. Nicole had the crazy idea of being alone with Winthrop while Gerald took Sadie home. But he looked in her direction with an expression on his face that chilled her to the bone. It was as if he hated her. And because she was confused and a little hurt by his coldness, she asked if she could ride with Gerald and Sadie. They took one look at her face and agreed without protest.

"Isn't it cloudy tonight?" Nicole asked on the way back to the ranch.

"Snow clouds. Lord, I hope we don't get shut up with that horsey set from back East. They'll be here tomorrow." Gerald glanced at Nicole. "By the way, one of Winthrop's guests is from Kentucky. But I didn't catch his name."

Nicole consoled herself with the thought that there must be hundreds of horsey sportsmen in the world besides her father.

NICOLE LAY AWAKE staring at the ceiling for what seemed hours. Finally she got up and decided to make herself a cup of hot chocolate. The kitchen light was on. She opened the door and paused, stopping dead at the sight of Winthrop bending over the stove. He was wearing pajama bottoms, but no top.

His chest was...incredible. Broad and bronzed and thick with a wedge of hair that covered his rippling muscles.

He turned, his dark hair tousled, and stared at her.

"I can't sleep," she confessed.

"I'm making some hot chocolate," he said. "Come in." He took the hot chocolate off the stove and poured it into the mugs before he put the pan in the sink to soak. He was limping rather badly, and she grimaced as he sat down with a hard wince.

"That's my fault, isn't it?" she asked gently. "I made you dance when you didn't want to. I'm sorry."

"I could have walked away from you if I'd wanted to," he said curtly. He took two pills, swallowing them down with a sip of the hot chocolate.

"But you didn't."

He turned, his dark eyes holding hers. "I like holding you."

Her face colored, and he smiled slowly. The silence was suddenly too sweeping, the loneliness of the deserted room staggering in its implications. They were alone. And he wanted her.

She felt him move before she saw him. He drew her up in front of him, holding her gently by her upper arms. "There's nothing to be afraid of," he whispered. "Nothing at all."

He bent his head, very slow and sure of himself. Nicole began to unwind, feeling the softness of his mouth along with its hardness, lik-

ing the delicate probing of his tongue just under her upper lip. She lifted herself toward him a little, put her hands against him and felt them tingle where they touched the thick hair that covered him.

His breath caught. He stopped and suddenly moved back. His eyes held hers, searching them. "I want more than this."

She couldn't look away. "How... how much more?"

His eyes went to her pajama jacket. "Nothing terribly indiscreet," he said quietly. He hooked his index finger into the V neckline of her pajamas and tugged her forward to him.

Her eyes went down to his lean fingers working the buttons with such deftness, and she couldn't look away. He undid them slowly, and then drew the fabric back from her high, pink breasts with a leisurely expertise that hypnotized her.

"God never made anything more beautiful than a woman's breasts," he said quietly, his voice very slow and deep. "Come here and let me hold you, Nicole. Let me teach you how beautiful it can be to touch skin against skin."

Her eyes closed at the first contact with his warm, hard body, and she cried out as her nipples stabbed into his skin, burying themselves in the damp, abrasive mat of hair that covered the hard muscles. He drew her very close, closing his own eyes as her soft body melted into him. He was aroused, and she knew it.

"It's exquisitely sweet, having you close to me this way." His arms

tightened and trembled a little. So did his tall, fit body. "Nicky," he breathed on a groan. He began to rock her, fostering a new kind of intimacy between them, one that should have shocked her but was strangely familiar. She clung to him, letting him hold her, yielding to his strength.

She drew in a long breath, and he shuddered as he felt her breasts swell against his skin. "Give me your mouth."

She lifted her lips to meet his. He kissed her slowly, warmly, and even that was intimate, his tongue probing softly in her mouth.

He shifted her a little so that his hand could find the soft curve of her breast and tease it into arching toward those tormenting fingers.

"Do you want me to keep going?" he whispered at her lips.

"Yes," she whispered back, her voice breaking.

"Like this?" he murmured, with a teasing touch around the nipple, his fingers faintly callused and deliciously abrasive on her soft skin. "Or like this?"

His thumb rubbed suddenly at the tiny hardness and she cried out, a whimper of sound. His head bent to her body, and as she watched, fascinated, he arched her and opened his mouth and put it completely over her breast.

She thought that as long as she lived, she'd never get over the sensation. It went on and on, tearing at her, shaking her, making her too weak to move, to breathe, to think. His mouth slid from one breast to

the other, and she moaned like a wounded thing.

Dazed, shuddering with sensation, she barely felt him move. And then she was on his lap in the chair, and he was holding her, cradling her.

"Shh," he whispered gently, his mouth soothing her now, touching her hot cheeks. "It's all right. Hush, darling, it's all right now."

He rocked her against him hungrily.

"You have exquisite breasts, Miss White," he breathed huskily. "As soft as satin, as warm as velvet. But if I don't cover them, you and I are very likely to become lovers within the next few seconds, right here on the floor." He sat her up on his lap like a big doll and proceeded to do up the buttons on her pajamas. When she was covered again, he drew her back down, holding her lazily while he pressed tender, undemanding kisses on her damp face.

"Any other woman I'd have in bed by now," he murmured. "But you aren't the kind of woman who can play around with sex."

"I wouldn't refuse you," she said slowly, choosing her words.

"I know. That makes it worse. I can't take the responsibility alone." He touched her mouth with a gentle finger.

"Responsibility?" she whispered.

"I could make you pregnant," he said gently. Her lips parted and the look in her eyes made him want to throw back his head and scream. His fingers trembled as they touched her face. "Nicky," he whispered.

"Do you want a son?" she asked in a husky, loving tone.

"Yes," he bit off. "I want one with you...."

In his eyes she saw the coolness of white sheets and the outline of two bodies in the darkness.... And all at once, she was standing and he was five feet away from her.

"I can't take you to bed one night and walk away from you the next morning. At my age, sex is a commitment, not a toy," Winthrop explained. "So suppose you go up to bed, and tomorrow we'll discuss terms."

"What kind of terms?"

He smiled slowly. "That would be telling."

She turned back to the door. "If it means I get to live with you, I'll agree to most anything," she said, and ran for it. Behind her, she heard rich, thunderous laughter, and by the time she got to the top of the staircase, she was laughing, too. Life was sweet and Winthrop had to feel the same way she did, because he was hinting at a lot more than a brief affair.

For an instant she had a twinge of guilt about not sharing her past with him. But there was still time, she told herself as she snuggled under the covers. Yes, there was time.

*

WHEN NICOLE WOKE UP the next morning, lacy white flakes were coming down like cotton out of the clouds, gently blanketing the trees and the grass. She moved to the

window and sighed, vividly remembering last night and the newness of what she'd shared with Winthrop. Her daydreams were rudely shattered by the loud noise of a four-wheel-drive vehicle coming up the driveway with Winthrop at the wheel. The hunting party, she guessed. Suddenly she came away from the window feeling sick. She'd go back to Chicago alone, right now. She'd pack her things and get out while she could.

"Nicky!" came Gerald's voice outside the door. "Guess who one of our visitors is? It's your father!"

Along with that horror came a new one. She hadn't told Winthrop who her father was, or that she'd renounced her inheritance. What was he going to think?

"I'll be right down," Nicole called back. Why did it have to be her father? she wondered miserably. Of all the sportsmen in the world, why him?

There were voices in the living room when she went downstairs, but the only face she saw was Winthrop's. The tender lover of last night was gone. His expression was hard, ice-cold.

"Look who's here," Gerald said, pulling her toward the big white-haired man in tweed.

"Hello, Nicky," her father said coldly. "Long time, no see."

"Not long enough," she replied, and the bitterness of the past was in her eyes.

"This is Carol Murdock," he said, introducing the willowy, very young redhead in ski pants and a

mohair sweater under all the fur. "She's visiting with me for a while."

He laughed shortly. "We haven't spoken in two years; have we, Nicky? Nicky holds me responsible for her mother's death. And for cutting her off without a dime after the funeral," he added with killing precision. "Which one of these rich Christophers have you set your cap for?"

Nicole felt panicky. Her father was turning everything around. Winthrop's expression told her that he believed her father, and it grew even harder.

"I'm working," she said with what little pride she had left. "And I'm not chasing anyone. I don't suppose you knew I was here, of course," she asked her father.

"I haven't known where you were in two years," he replied shortly. "There's been a noticeable difference since you moved out, honey. I can balance the checkbook these days. I hope you find someone to support you, but it won't ever be me again." Dominic laughed, bending to brush a kiss across Carol's hair. "Your mother was enough."

"Don't you talk about my mother," Nicole said huskily. Her green eyes spit fire at him. "Don't you dare!"

"Do you have TV?" Carol asked suddenly, searching around. "It's so boring, just sitting."

Nicole was taken aback when Winthrop abruptly got up and led

Carol off to show her the TV and VCR in the living room.

"Why did you make me out to be a cheap gold digger?" Nicole asked, searching the face that was so like her own.

"Just for the record," he said coldly, "I didn't kill your mother. She was no saint, Nicky, for all that you're trying to canonize her posthumously. She turned me out on the town as soon as she knew you were on the way, in revenge for what I'd done to her. Making her pregnant was a cardinal sin. Are you shocked, Nicky? Didn't you realize that people are human?"

Nicole listened, only half hearing him. Why should her mother have hated him for that? She was suddenly aware of Gerald, an unwilling eavesdropper to the argument. She shifted away from her father and tried to smile.

"Do you have anything for me to do?" Nicole asked Gerald, her tone conciliatory and faintly hopeful. He caught on quickly.

"As a matter of fact..." Gerald replied, and smiled vaguely. "If you'll excuse us..."

"Is he your partner?" Dominic asked Nicole, frowning.

"He's my boss," she replied coolly. "I'm his secretary."

Her father stiffened. "You're joking, of course," he said curtly. "No White has worked for a living for three generations—"

"Until now," Nicole interrupted. "You ought to try it. It has a humbling effect on a haughty spirit." She turned and left the room.

Nicole spent the rest of the day trying to avoid the other guests, and the snow continued to fall. At the evening meal Winthrop sat at the head of the table with Carol on one side and Gerald on the other and completely ignored Nicole and her glum father. She was watching big dark eyes light up as he spoke to the nubile redhead, and hating the other woman for arousing the tender side of the man she could no longer reach.

"You wear your heart on your sleeve," Dominic said coolly. "Never let it show."

"A page right out of your book." She laughed shortly. "I suppose I'll be just like you when I'm your age. What a lovely future to look forward to."

"Stop sniping at me, Nicky," he said coolly, and his green eyes met hers. "All your regrets and all mine won't change the past. Neither will giving up your rightful legacy. Your mother wouldn't have wanted that. She had high hopes for you."

"Did she? I don't remember her being sober enough to discuss them in the past."

"Grow up, honey," he remarked. "Your mother was neurotic. She couldn't handle responsibility. In fact, neither could I. We were just kids when you came along, Nicky. Both of us. Kids playing house. And then there we were with a real live baby. We had to be responsible for you. That wasn't an easy task for two people who'd never known what it was to be responsible."

"What you and Mother had

wasn't a marriage," Nicole accused him, all the hurt of the past coming back.

"We didn't love each other enough," he said simply. "Your mother and I were nice people, separately. We just weren't compatible. Who do you blame for that?"

For two years Nicole had blamed her father for her mother's untimely death, just as she'd blamed herself. But what if neither of them was responsible?

"I'm a black sheep, Nicky," Dominic said. "I always have been. But I never hated you, honey. I never could."

She tried to smile. "It seemed like it when you got here."

"I missed you," he said curtly, as if he hated even saying the words. "I missed Brianna. Everybody left me at one time. Damn it, how do you think I felt?"

He got up and stormed out of the room without even a backward glance. Nicole stared after him with confused emotions. He'd sounded, and looked, hurt. She rose, oblivious to the others in the room, and went upstairs to her room.

THE DOOR opened, cutting into her thoughts, and the comb paused in midair over her short, dark hair as Winthrop walked into the room and slammed the door behind him.

"You could have told me." His eyes narrowed on her face. "I asked you point-blank if you were related to Dominic White and you side-stepped the question."

She tilted her chin up and looked at him, drinking in the sight of his face, adoring it with her soft green eyes. "I'm not a bored heiress. Are you so afraid to believe what you feel, instead of what you hear? Can't you take my word for it? My father was getting even," she said, moving closer. "He was paying me back for walking out on him after Mama's funeral. He's over it now. He'll tell you the truth if you ask him!"

"I know the truth." He lifted his chin as she came closer, and the expression on his hard face was not welcoming. She pressed against him and his steely hands caught her, holding her away.

"Do I make you nervous, big, bad rancher?" she whispered, moving as close as his hands would allow. Her fingers went to his chest and her nails drew lazily across the cotton fabric. His heartbeat increased sharply.

"No," he denied. But something flickered in his dark eyes.

"Well, you make me nervous. You make me shake all over when you touch me, and that doesn't have a thing to do with how much money you've got in the bank. And I didn't lie to you about being innocent. I am. And when we made love in the kitchen, I would have died for you." Her lips parted, welcoming, pleading, as she looked up into his eyes.

"Damn you, Nicky."

"Winthrop." It was a moan, and he covered it with his lips.

It seemed to take a long time for him to realize what was happening. Her warm body in his arms drugged

him. But minute by aching minute, the past came back. He eased his mouth away from hers, steeling himself not to care about the soft accusation in her drowsy eyes as she watched him pull away. "No, thanks," he said quietly. He was as politely indifferent as if he were refusing a drink of water when he wasn't thirsty.

She looked up at him with slow comprehension. She'd banked everything on his desire for her; she'd seen it as her one way to reach him. But it hadn't. She'd lost.

*

SOMEHOW, Nicky got through the night. Winthrop had excused himself and gone out to help his men keep a check on the cattle. The snow had made the mountain roads impassable except with a four-wheel drive. But the hunters settled in with easy acceptance.

At dawn on the third day, the hunters piled into Winthrop's Jeep and headed down the valley. Gerald and Nicky worked alone in the study, leaving Carol to her videos.

"I'm worried about Sadie and Mrs. Todd," Gerald said abruptly. "I tried to phone them an hour or so ago, and the lines are down."

"Then let's go see her," Nicole said. "Isn't there a four-wheel drive around here somewhere that we can use? I'll tell Mary where we're going."

Gerald had the old Jeep idling when Nicole climbed in beside him. The vehicle sputtered and lurched as

he put it in gear, and the chains on the heavy tires made a nice clanking sound as he shot down the mountain road. By the time they turned off onto the dirt road that led up to the Todd place, Nicky was regretting her decision to go with him. Gerald wasn't the driver Winthrop was, and as the heavy snow continued to fly at them, Gerald swung too wide around a curve and the Jeep suddenly left the road. It lurched crazily sideways and slid down onto a lodgepole pine. Nicky got a sudden and terrifying view of a sheer drop out Gerald's window.

With Gerald's help, she managed to lever herself up to the passenger door and gingerly open it. The Jeep pitched a little, and she caught her breath and shuddered; but the vehicle remained fairly secure against the pine. She managed to tumble out, then reached up to help Gerald.

They cleared the Jeep and collapsed onto the thick, soft snow, almost buried in it while they caught their breath.

"We're closer to the ranch than the Todds' place," Gerald said when they were standing in the road. But the snow was coming harder and thicker, and it was blinding, stinging their eyes. "We can follow the road back...."

We hope, she added silently, because the blizzard wasn't letting up. She leaned into the wind and started walking. Beside her, Gerald kept up the pace. But when they'd gone a few hundred yards, the going got harder and harder. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the

other, watching her boot sink into the deep snow. It came over the boot top and down into her warm socks, wetting them, chilling them.

They rounded a bend, and found the road suddenly buried under a huge drift of snow. Nicole stopped, her eyes on the blanket of white around them, but there was no alternative route. They had to get through that drift or die.

"Oh, damn," she wailed, hating the hot sting of tears in her eyes.

"I'm so tired," Gerald sighed. He sank down with his back to the snowdrift. "So tired..."

"You can't go to sleep," she burst out. "We have to go on."

"How? The snow's too deep. We can't get through, Nicky." He closed his eyes, leaning back against the bank that angled against the snowdrift. "Nice..."

Nicky shook him, but he was too weary to try anymore. She sank down beside him and sat there, looking around at the deadly white beauty of it.

Her green eyes went up to the sky. Well, it wasn't such a very bad place to die, she mused as drowsiness swept over her. She was near Winthrop, even though he didn't care anymore. Maybe he'd bury her here, and she'd be near him forever....

Something touched her. Shook her. That voice—it was deep and urgent and somehow familiar, but she didn't understand what it was asking. She tried to open her eyes, but it was just too much work. She slept.

Her head ached. She sneezed and

the sound echoed around her. Was she dead?

She opened her eyes slowly. A canopy, pink, overhead. She turned her head and there was Winthrop. He was unshaven, his hair needed combing. He was sprawled beside the bed in a chair half his size, his booted feet splayed, his mouth open. He was snoring.

She stared at him for a long moment, memorizing him. "Winthrop." His name sounded rusty. She frowned, because it had hurt her throat to call him.

"You were damned lucky," Winthrop said, opening his eyelids. He glared at her out of eyes as black as night.

"Gerald?" she rasped.

"He's fine, thank God. I've had a hell of a night watching you fade in and out. You little fool, people have died in snowdrifts out here!"

"Oh!"

The exclamation was in response to the sudden, unexpected descent of his mouth, square over hers. His mouth opened against hers, lifting, teasing, his breath mingling wildly with hers while his hands caught hers and pulled them down to the bed beside her head, his fingers interlocking with hers.

"I could ravish you." He ground out the words huskily, and the eyes that glanced at her were blazing. He bent again, tormenting her mouth with his lips, brushing, lifting, teasing until she began to writhe on the sheets. He groaned her name, his mouth so tender, so exquisitely gentle with hers that tears ran hotly

down her cheeks. He was the world, and everything in it. She loved him so.

Even as she thought the words, she whispered them under his warm mouth, breathed the truth against him, echoed her feelings like a prayer.

"No." He drew back suddenly. "Don't say it. I don't want that," he said quietly. "I'm sorry. But I...can't, Nicky."

"I can't help it," she whispered softly. "I'm sorry, too, but I do love you. I do, I do!"

"For God's sake, Nicky, I'm not a marrying man!"

Her face flamed when she realized where the conversation was leading. She stared at him, horror-struck. She hadn't meant that, but he'd assumed she was begging him to marry her.

"I...I didn't mean..." She searched his dark eyes quietly. "I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you. But you don't hate me anymore, do you?" she asked weakly.

"No, I don't hate you," he said quietly. He bent toward her, watching her face lift for him, her mouth part. He looked into her eyes while he kissed her, seeing the pupils dilate, the lids close drowsily. That excited him more, and he drew back before he got in over his head.

Nicole watched him get up, trying to hide her feelings. But he limped suddenly and she sat up, her breath catching. "Winthrop, you're hurt!" she burst out.

The caring note in her voice cut him to the quick. He glared at her.

"I don't need a nurse," he bit off. "I can take care of myself. I've had years of practice."

He went out and slammed the door, leaving her stunned and hurt.

*

SOON AFTER Winthrop left the room, Nicole's father came in and took the chair Winthrop had vacated.

"Feeling any better?" he asked, and seemed to be genuinely concerned. Nicole could remember being sick as a child and having neither of her parents come near her.

"I'll be all right," she said. "I just feel a little tired."

"If Winthrop hadn't decided to call it quits early, the two of you would have frozen to death. He carried you over that drift all by himself, weak leg and all. I guess he's hurting like hell, from the way he limps, but he was determined."

She felt her heart leap with the pleasure that knowledge gave her. "He's quite a man."

"I think so," he agreed. "I told him the truth, by the way. Maybe," he added hesitantly, "you and I could exchange Christmas cards. Then, as time goes by, you might come to Kentucky to see me."

"Or you might come to Chicago to see me." She sighed.

"You know...in some crazy way, I loved your mother, even if we couldn't quite get our act together. She's pretty irreplaceable." His eyes fell. "God, it hurt when she

died. I couldn't even tell you how it hurt."

"I don't think I would have listened" if you'd told me then." She sat up straighter. "Thanks for coming up to see me."

"I'll check on you again, Nicky," Dominic said as he started toward the door.

Nicky must have slept then. She woke in the early hours just before dawn and glanced at the tall man sprawled again in the chair, grimacing as he breathed. His leg was probably hurting, and here he sat, when he could have been comfortable in bed.

Nicky got up, just staring at him. She touched his hard, warm cheek with her fingertips, tracing its high cheekbones. "Winthrop?" she whispered. "Come to bed."

He made a sound and his head turned, but his eyes didn't open. He let her tug him out of the chair, and he sprawled onto the bed with a mumbled protest. Then, with a mischievous grin, she crawled back under the covers and snuggled close.

The light streaming in the window woke her. She opened her eyes and found Mary standing at the curtains.

Mary paused beside the bed and bent to touch Nicky's forehead. "No fever. Good. You live yet." She pursed her lips at the clear indentation of a head in the pillow beside Nicky's. "You have a pajama party last night?"

Nicky grinned. "He was sprawled in the chair and groaning in his

sleep. I got up and led him over here and tucked him in. He never knew."

"Poor man. Shame on you. You should not take advantage of the helpless." Mary grinned before she went out.

To Nicky's dismay, Winthrop didn't come back all day. She expected him every time the door opened. Mary brought breakfast and then Gerald came, followed by her father and Carol. When Mary came back after lunch to pick up the dishes, she cocked her head at Nicky's forlorn expression. "He cannot get up just yet," she said after a minute. "I think he may have pulled a tendon. I have made a poultice for it, which will take away the pain and make it heal. But in the meantime, he is an invalid."

"It sounds as though he might need a little nursing," Nicky suggested.

"Perhaps." Mary shrugged. "But put on your robe." Her dark eyes held Nicky's with subtle warning. "He is still a man."

"I love him," Nicky said simply. "I wouldn't hurt him."

She put on her long white chenille robe and went along to Winthrop's room, a little nervous about how she'd be received.

He glared at her from his bed, where he lay taut-faced with only a sheet drawn haphazardly over his lean hips for cover. "What do you want?" he asked curtly.

"I thought you might need something," she said, hesitating. "How about some fruit juice?"

His dark eyes narrowed. "How

about telling me how in hell I wound up in bed with you last night?"

Her eyebrows arched. "You were in bed with me?" she asked with pretended horror. "How scandalous!"

His lips made a thin line. "It wasn't scandalous. Nothing happened! I don't ravish women in their sleep."

"Ah, but you don't know what I might have done to you," she said, lifting her eyebrows mockingly. "Anyway, you rejected me."

"What were you trying to do?" he demanded.

"You were groaning and I knew your leg was hurting you," she said with a smile. "Since you seemed determined to sit up with me, I thought you should be comfortable. So I led you into bed, and you went with me just like a lamb."

"Which wasn't what I felt like when I woke up," he replied curtly. "Your gown was up around your hips and half off your shoulder."

"It was?" Her eyes were wide, trusting and innocent.

He sighed impatiently, and stretched lazily, watching her eyes drop to his chest with the movement. He liked the way it felt to let her look at him like this.

"You're a surprising girl, Nicole," he said, his voice dropping an octave, deep and sexy.

"Am I? I thought I was a gold-digging adventuress."

"That sounds bitter," he mused.

"I don't want a rich man, Winthrop. I have a job I enjoy, and I can

make my own way in life. I was never looking for a...a meal ticket."

"I didn't know that. All I had left were my instincts, and they'd already let me down once. I haven't trusted a woman since this happened." He touched his knee.

"Were you in love with her?" she asked hesitantly, because it was suddenly important that she know that.

He met her searching gaze. "I wanted Deanne until she was an obsession with me. When she walked out, I thought I was going to bleed to death, and for two years I felt like a zombie. Is that love? I don't know. It's the most intense thing I'd ever felt, so maybe it was. But I'm over her now and I have no inclination whatsoever to go through it again."

Nicole sat down slowly on the bed beside him, her soft weight moving the mattress. "Love shouldn't be all physical." Her voice was as gentle as the fingertips that went hesitantly to his firm mouth and touched it. "It should be a sharing between two people. A bonding of thoughts and hopes and dreams. A linking of intangible things. Companionship. Friendship. Openness and honesty."

"You lied to me," he reminded her curtly. His fingers caught her wrist. "And you got too damned close," he said suddenly, every last bit of caution gone. His eyes glittered dangerously.

Before she could react, he levered her down onto the bed, on her back, and loomed over her with a purely arrogant look in his dark eyes.

"I don't want to be another one of your conquests," she told him, struggling.

"Sure you do. If you keep thrashing around like that, you're going to dislodge my sheet and the mystery of life will be over!"

She stopped immediately, glaring at him with wide green eyes. "You don't want commitment, remember?"

"I don't have to propose marriage to kiss you," he returned, bending.

"I have a cold—I'm contagious!" she squeaked.

"I have a sore leg, and that's not catching. But desire is," he whispered against her lips. "Shall I show you how easy it is to catch?"

He nuzzled her face with his, in soft, gentle caresses that wore her down all too easily. "Touch me."

Her hand faltered shyly, but he guided it over the hard muscles of his chest, letting her feel the silky hair, the ripple of muscle under rough skin. He traced her cheek with his fingers as he kissed her very lightly, and his hand slowly lowered to the buttons of her bodice under the robe.

"No," she protested.

"You want to be touched as much as I want to touch you." His fingers moved to the edge of her breast, tracing around it with maddening expertise, making her moan and stiffen suddenly in an explosion of unexpected pleasure.

"You belong to me. Mine," he breathed against her mouth. Her movements were exciting him, her little cries caught in his lips, making

him hungry. "All of you. Here and here..."

He had her gown around her waist, and his whirling mind registered her complete abandonment to his ardor. He could do anything now and she'd let him. That realization was what slowed him down. He lifted his head quietly, looking at the helpless reaction of her body to his lovemaking.

"I'm afraid," she whispered.

"There's no reason to be frightened." He drew the backs of his fingers against her, loving the way she tensed with pleasure. "I go just as high as you do when we make love. It's mutual, this chemistry. It has been from the very beginning."

"I won't have an affair with you," she said quietly.

"I wouldn't let you," he returned. He nuzzled her nose with his. "But I don't want marriage."

"I'll have to leave," she whispered, feeling her heart break.

"Inevitably," he agreed. He looked down at her as his fingers drew tenderly over her bare breasts and she trembled. "It knocks the very breath out of me to touch you this way," he breathed.

"You aren't the only one," she said shakily.

He bent and put his mouth gently on the soft curve, and then he drew back while it was still just a whisper of sensation. He helped her up, buttoned her gown and belted her robe with exaggerated indulgence.

As she left, Nicky managed a rueful smile at Winthrop, feeling disappointed and a little shy. His ex-

pression, on the other hand, gave nothing away.

*

THE HUNTERS went home on Saturday. Nicky found herself alone with Winthrop, who towered over her.

"You seem to have arrived at a truce with your father," he mused.

"I misunderstood a lot of things. Grief plays havoc with the brain," she said quietly. "Your knee...is it better?"

He half turned toward her. "Why? Were you thinking of offering me a massage?"

"I don't go around playing with men's legs."

"I know a lot of things you didn't do until I came along," he mused, and his eyes went straight to her yellow sweater. He tilted her chin up with a lean, strong hand and looked down at her. "I'm going out to check on my purebred herd. I'd take you with me, but you're a distraction, Kentucky girl."

"Listen here, Winthrop—"

"Say it again," he whispered at her lips, so close that she could almost taste him.

"Win...Winthrop," she obliged.

"Mmm," he murmured. His lips nuzzled hers, tempting them, urging her closer to him in the dim light of the hall. "Come up here...." He actually lifted her off the floor with two steady hands at her waist. "Now open that pretty mouth and kiss me properly."

He had the most incredible way of getting to her. She was lost and

witless, drugged on his nearness. She gave him her mouth, parted her lips, and moaned when he deepened the kiss hungrily.

Winthrop finally lifted his head, his breath coming hard and quick on her faintly bruised lips.

"Do you like it that way?" he whispered roughly. "Or do you want me to be gentle with you?"

She trembled with reaction. "I like it...any way at all, with you," she whispered, clinging to him.

"Same here." He let her slide down his powerful body to the floor, savoring the feel of her against him.

Her eyes were wide and soft and drowsy, and he bent to brush her mouth once more with his. He was gone then, and she watched him until he was out of sight.

MRS. TODD HAD decided at long last to go and visit her sister in Florida, and it didn't really come as a surprise when Gerald announced at supper that he'd asked Sadie to marry him.

After they finished eating, Gerald excused himself, and Winthrop invited Nicole to go look at the colt with him.

"Isn't it late to be looking at horses?" she asked.

He glanced down at her. "Why? Are you afraid to be alone with me after dark?"

She hated that arrogant look. "Of course not!"

"Where is he?" she asked once they were inside the barn.

"Over there."

She followed his gesture and leaned over the gate, watching the little chestnut colt nuzzle at his mother's belly.

"Aw," she cooed. "Isn't he cute?"

Winthrop pushed back his hat with an irritable sigh. "Gerald says you and he are going back Monday to get the office shipshape so he and Sadie can get married Friday and have an extended honeymoon."

"Yes," she said absently.

He glowered down at her. "Look here, Nicole, we won't see each other again."

"Yes, I know." She looked up at him quietly.

"I'll always limp," he said unexpectedly.

"That's too bad."

"Is that all you can say?" he growled.

Her eyebrows arched. "What would you like? You're telling me what a bad risk you are, and I'm agreeing with you. You've been right all along, Winthrop. I need a younger man who doesn't limp, who wants marriage and children, so now I'm going to go back to Chicago to find one." She looked at the growing anger in his hard face. "That should satisfy you."

"Would you like to know what would satisfy me right now?" he asked under his breath.

"Not really. I'm tired and I'd like to go to bed."

"At last, we agree on something." He moved toward her.

"Oh, no, you don't. I'm saving myself for my future husband."

"Thank you."

"It won't be you," she told him doggedly. "You aren't a marrying man, remember? You don't want commitment."

"I don't know what I want anymore," he muttered.

"Well, I do," she said. "I want to go home. You only want my body. And that's not enough!"

"Will you listen to me?"

"No!"

She turned and ran for the house, easily outdistancing him. All he wanted to do was back her into a corner and seduce her. Well, he wasn't getting another chance to do that! She loved him, but she couldn't settle for a one-night stand. Not even with the only man she'd ever wanted.

*

WINTHROP wasn't around the next morning, and as the day wore on, he was still missing. Nicole had just finished setting the table for supper when the kitchen door opened and he appeared.

"Where's Gerald?" he asked.

Her heart was beating double time, but she wasn't about to let him know it. "He and Sadie drove Mrs. Todd to the airport. She left for Florida today."

"I know. I said goodbye before I went out."

"Sit down," Mary told them. "I will bring supper."

Winthrop motioned for Nicky to go ahead, and even pulled out her chair for her. He studied her intently

while Mary brought in the main course, followed by rolls, vegetables and fruit. He stared at her for so long that her heart began to run wild and her breathing became quick and labored. "You might come back with Gerald for the wedding," he said abruptly.

Her heartbeat increased. But even as she heard him say the words, she knew that the minute she left the ranch, he'd forget her. His offer was just a sugar pill—something to keep her happy until she left. He didn't mean it.

"That would be nice," she said, without any real conviction.

"Nicky..."

Whatever he was about to say was lost, because Gerald and Sadie came back, and the conversation centered on the wedding. Bedtime came and there wasn't a single opportunity for any more discussion.

The next morning, before she had time to plan what she was going to say, she and Gerald were being driven to the airport. Winthrop was long gone, apparently out hunting again. Nicole didn't even get to say goodbye to him before she flew back to Chicago.

*

BACK AT WORK, Nicky found herself haunted by a particularly vivid ghost. Winthrop drifted around in her thoughts constantly so that she couldn't eat or sleep or rest. Gerald was surprised when she said she wouldn't be going back to Montana for his wedding, but once she ex-

plained her feelings of love for Winthrop, he understood.

Nicole settled into the office routine the day after Gerald's departure, fielding questions and phone calls. She wasn't prepared for the phone to ring and an angry, irritated Winthrop to be on the other end of the line.

"Where in hell are you?" he demanded coldly.

She stared at the phone as if it had grown teeth. "I'm...here. Working," she faltered.

"You were invited to the wedding," he reminded her.

"Yes, I know."

"Then why aren't you here?"

She closed her eyes and prayed for strength. "I don't think it's a good idea, Winthrop."

"Why not, for God's sake?"

"Because I can't live on dreams," she burst out. "And the sooner I face it, the better off I'll be. I know you mean well, but it...it tears the heart out of me, that's all. I won't come."

She hung up quickly, before he could talk her into going to Montana. All the rest of the day she expected him to call back. But he didn't. She went to Kentucky and spent the weekend with a surprised and very different father and got back to her apartment feeling vaguely happy. But when a week went by with no word from Winthrop, she fell into a black depression. He didn't call. He didn't write. Christmas Eve came and Nicky gave up hoping that she'd hear from him. She wished her boss a merry Christ-

mas, and went to Lexington for the holidays.

Her father met her at the airport with Carol beside him. "It's just like old times." Nicky sighed as they drove through town. "I always did love the way they decorate the city."

"Me, too. You ought to see the decorations we have at the house," her father said with a twinkle in his eyes.

"And your present," Carol added, also twinkling. "It was really hard to wrap, so I gave up trying and just stuck a bow on it."

When they got to the house, her father helped them out of their coats, then looked at Nicole. "Your present's in the living room. We'll go see about some hot cider while you open it."

"Aren't you coming?" she asked.

"Not just yet. Go on, now. And merry Christmas, sweetheart." He kissed her cheek and then went away, whispering to Carol.

Nicole opened the living-room door and stopped dead. Her present was sitting on the sofa, looking toward her furiously, with a glass of whiskey in one lean hand.

"Merry Christmas," Winthrop said curtly.

Her mouth flew open. He had a bow stuck on the pocket of his suit, and he looked hung over and a little disheveled. But he was so handsome that her heart skipped wildly.

"You've got a bow on your pocket," she said in a voice that sounded too high-pitched to be her own.

"Of course I've got a bow on my pocket. I'm your damned Christmas present." He got up and started toward her, limping just a little. "I can't eat," he said accusingly. "I can't sleep, I can't work. I spent a week up in the mountains trying to get you out of my head, and all I got was drunk. I'm hung over, bleary-eyed and half mad with wanting you."

"Oh, I'm so glad, Winthrop," she whispered. Her heart went wild. "Because I'm half mad with wanting you, too...oh!"

The tiny cry was lost under his devouring mouth. "You're mine now," he breathed into her parted lips. "You're going to marry me, lady. I've got all the necessary papers. All we need is a blood test, and that's scheduled an hour from now. We're going to have a Christmas wedding."

Tears stung her eyes. She looked up at him through a drowsy haze, her body intimately pressed to his, her eyes wide and soft and loving. "You don't want to get married," she whispered.

"Yes, I do," he corrected her. The look in his eyes was so tender

that it knocked the breath out of her. "I just didn't know it until I let you walk out the door." He bent, brushing her mouth with exquisite gentleness. "I can't quite make it without you, Nicky. I've never been so alone. Come home where you belong. I'm too old, and too cynical, and not quite the man I used to be, but I...I love you."

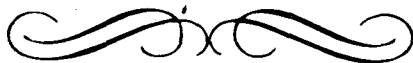
"I love you, too," she breathed. "Deathlessly. Hopelessly. With all my heart!"

"God, I've been miserable without you!" He kissed her hungrily and she felt his hands at her hips, lifting her up into an embrace that made her shudder.

She looked straight into his dark eyes and imagined how beautiful it would be joining with him in loving union, softness to hardness, tender rhythm on cool sheets in the darkness. And she gasped again. "Oh, my," she whispered shakily.

"Oh, my, indeed," he whispered. He bent his head. "Merry Christmas, sugarplum."

She smiled back as she gave him her mouth. "You delicious Christmas present, you..."





REBECCA WINTERS





Rebecca Winters is a much-published and internationally popular writer; she's also won quite a few awards, including the National Readers' Choice Award and the *Romantic Times* Reviewer's Choice Award. Not only that, she was named the 1995 Utah Writer of the Year. Rebecca is well-known for her fascinating story ideas and her intense, emotional writing. As bestselling author Debbie Macomber has said, "Rebecca Winters writes from the heart. She has the ability to make me laugh...or cry. Mostly she makes me care."




The Story Princess

To millions of children around the world, Domini Loring was The Story Princess. But to Jarod Wolfe, she was all woman. Was he her Prince Charming...in wolf's clothing?



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“So remember, boys and girls, send a letter to me, the Story Princess, telling why you’d like to spend the day with me.”

Peter Wolfe wrote the address on a piece of paper. “Lots of kids will be sending her letters, Mike. Ours will have to be really good to win.”

“Let’s tell her she’s the most beautiful princess in the world,” Michael answered. “Write in the letter that we don’t have a mommy and that’s why we want to win.”

“The entire state of Washington will be entering that contest,” their father commented. “The child who wins will have to be on the verge of death. A dying child’s request will add drama to the contest.”

“Oh,” Michael gave Peter a look. “I still wish we’d win. We’d get to be on TV. Maybe she’d let us act out ‘The Gingerbread Man.’”

“She’s already done that one. The winner will get to do a new story,” Peter reasoned.

Their dad rose to his full six-foot height and stretched. “Neither of you is old enough to understand that although she may have the face and voice of an angel, in reality she’s a grade-B actress who needs an audience to exist.”

Peter watched his dad scoop Mike from the floor and give him a bear hug before setting him on his broad shoulders. “Mike—remember that in all probability the Story Princess

doesn’t even like children. You only see what she’s like in front of the TV cameras.”

“Well, I love her!” Michael’s voice quavered. “I still want to win.”

“So do thousands of other children. Now it’s time for bed.”

Peter followed them up the staircase to the room he shared with Michael, overlooking Port Orchard Bay. Long after they’d said their prayers and hopped into bed, he lay awake and reflected on everything his dad had said. An idea began to take hold. Finally, he crept out of bed and went over to the desk to write his letter to the Story Princess.

DOMINI LORING sat back in the swivel chair, exhausted. The idea of reading another heartrending letter was almost more than she could bear. Unfortunately, in the two weeks the contest had run, she hadn’t yet come across a letter that truly stood out from the rest.

Through bleary eyes she noted the Bremerton postmark on the next envelope. Deciding this would be the last one for tonight, she opened it.

Dear Story Princess,
My dad says all you crave is attention. But I don’t believe him. Michael and I think you’re beautiful, and that you

have the most beautiful voice in the world. You remind us of our mom. She died and went to heaven. Michael's going there soon to be with her. But before that happens, he wants to spend the day with you. Being with you would make him the happiest boy on earth.

I don't know what a bee grade actress is, but I know you love children. My dad says you act different when you go home. I don't believe him.

Your friends,

Peter and Michael Wolfe

P.S. If Michael wins, could I come, too? Thanks,

Peter, 8 years old.

Michael, 5 years old.

Domini's eyes widened in astonishment. How dare the children's father say those things to his own innocent children! Perhaps the man could be forgiven, since he'd lost his wife and was about to lose one of his boys. But the fact that he wasn't so far off with his B-grade-actress comment stung—years earlier she could have been an opera singer, but in the end she couldn't commit herself to such a demanding career.

She reread the letter. It appeared the father had run out of hope. What that family needed was a miracle, a healing balm, and she was in a position to provide it. She actually found herself wishing she had the Story Princess's magic powers to prevent the inevitable.

Domini sat down at her typewriter

to compose the congratulatory letter. There was a certain satisfaction in knowing that the boys' father would have to admit he'd jumped to erroneous conclusions about her.

She loved her work as a children's performer, the narrating and singing that went into making her records. But *she did not need the limelight to exist!*

"EXCUSE ME," a masculine voice called out a few days later as Domini hurried past the reception area. "I'm looking for the Story Princess. Could you point me in the right direction?"

Domini studied the striking man who filled the foyer with his presence. His eyes were as intense as the indigo of stained glass with the sunshine filtering through. Beneath the glare of the overhead light, his rich brown hair glinted with unmistakable gold highlights. He wasn't a man a woman would forget.

"I'm the Story Princess."

"I find that difficult to believe." The warmth of male admiration in his eyes intensified. He moved closer.

"Let me assure you that you've found her," she said, realizing that he thought the Story Princess was a blonde.

His gaze locked with hers. "You're right. You and the Story Princess have the same impossibly green eyes," he said in a quiet tone that sent a delicious chill through her body. "I'm Dr. Jarod Wolfe, Peter and Michael's father."

This man was the boys' grieving father? Somehow she'd imagined a person quite different from the handsome male whose sensuous appeal reached out to her like a living thing.

"How do you do? I'm Domini Loring," she said, extending a slim, well-manicured hand, which he clasped in a gentle but firm grip. She felt his gaze travel freely over her delicately arched brows, her slightly almond-shaped green eyes, and linger on the redness of her wide mouth, now fixed in a determined smile. "When I read Peter's letter, I knew I had the winner. You have a wonderful son, Dr. Wolfe. I was really touched by his love for Michael." Her voice trembled as she spoke. "I promise to do everything in my power to make their visit perfect."

He blinked, as if surprised by her words. "They're actually going to be on one of your television shows?"

Is he worried about Michael?

"Yes. They'll each play a small part. Will that be a problem for Michael?"

His blue eyes were half-veiled. "I don't know. I'd hate for him to get sick right in the middle of your show."

"We could do a retake if anything like that happened," she hastened to assure him.

He looked pensive. "He'll probably get sick the night before the visit. He has a history of getting too excited."

She swallowed hard. "Dr. Wolfe,

please don't worry about it. If he's too sick to come to the studio on the tenth we'll reschedule it. I've done a lot of tours of children's hospitals. Anything can happen and usually does," she added with a sad smile.

"You came to Bremerton Memorial last Christmas, didn't you?"

"Yes. Do you work there?" Surely she would have noticed him.

"Yes. I'm in pediatrics."

"My father was a family practitioner in Tacoma. He ended up doing a lot of pediatrics himself. I used to help out in his office."

His eyes flickered. "You're full of surprises, Miss Loring. I'm relieved my children will be in such good hands. What time should I deliver them?"

"Ten o'clock," she answered quietly. Did he mistrust her on principle, or was it something personal?

"Good night, then, Miss Loring. I'll see you on the tenth." His eyes swept over her once more, as if to memorize her body and her face, before he strode out of the building.

She stood rooted to the spot long after he'd disappeared. He didn't like her, yet she knew intuitively that she disturbed him as much as he disturbed her. And she didn't have the slightest idea how to deal with the emotions he'd brought to life in her. Hopefully when she saw him again, she'd realize that she'd only imagined his compelling attraction.

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A LARGE CROWD gathered in front of the TV studio to await the arrival of the Wolfe children. Dressed in full costume with her wig and crown, Domini sat on the throne used for her television program. A gold carpet extended from the platform, down the steps and out to the street.

The second she caught sight of Dr. Wolfe's brown hair and strong profile her heart started to pound. With her gaze fastened helplessly on him, she didn't notice the tow-headed little boy until he was practically upon her.

"Mike!" she heard Dr. Wolfe call, but the child seemed intent on reaching Domini. The crowd burst into spontaneous applause as the child flung his arms around Domini's slender waist, hugging her for dear life.

"Story Princess!" he gasped in a tone so full of emotion Domini felt a lump form in her throat. Out of the corner of her eye she watched the approach of his father and straightened to welcome him.

"Dr. Wolfe," she greeted him in even tones.

"There's no question about your identity this morning." His brilliant blue gaze fused with hers. With one sweep of his eyes she felt her body inflame and knew color filled her cheeks.

Quickly she concentrated on Michael. She smiled down into the brightest sky blue eyes she'd ever seen. They were round as saucers, set in a smiling face. Domini

searched for signs of illness, but he seemed perfectly normal and spry.

"Am I really going to spend the whole day with you?" he asked, his heart in his eyes.

"If that's what you'd like." Wordlessly, she squeezed his hand and extended her other hand to his brother. "Peter? I've been anxious to meet the author of that wonderful entry."

"Thanks for choosing my letter, Story Princess," he said politely, shaking her hand. "You're even prettier than you look on TV."

"Where's your magic wand?" Michael asked with such earnestness that everyone laughed. Domini couldn't stop herself from glancing at Dr. Wolfe. But instead of a smile, she surprised a puzzled, almost sober expression on his lean face.

"I left it inside so I could greet you properly," she improvised, still trapped by Dr. Wolfe's intent regard. "Are you planning to stay for the day?" she asked him in an aside, strangely unsettled by his mood.

"This is their special moment. I'll be back for the children at five. Peter knows the number where I can be reached in case you need me."

She bit her lip. "Are there any special instructions concerning Michael?"

His brows formed the hint of a frown. "If he gets too tired or unmanageable, call me immediately." He knelt and put an arm around Michael, who still clung to Domini's hand. "Do everything the Story Princess tells you." Then he stood

and patted Peter's shoulder. "Peter, look after your brother."

"Dr. Wolfe," Domini whispered, worried by his concerned expression, "I promise to take the greatest care of your children."

There was an ominous pause. "I have no doubt of it, but please—let Michael know before the day is over that this is only make-believe." On that cryptic note he headed toward his car.

Domini turned toward the studio and reached for Peter's hand, which slipped eagerly into hers. "The man with the camera is going to take pictures of us all day long and make a movie, which I'll send to you for a souvenir as soon as it's edited."

With a smile she ushered the boys in the direction of the building. "I thought you might like to wear costumes and enact an old Russian fairy tale. I think you'll both be perfect for the parts. We'll take a tour of the studio first, then eat lunch while I tell you the story of 'The Little Blind Prince.' Then we'll let you choose parts and rehearse a couple of times before we tape it this afternoon."

Michael suddenly burrowed into her, clasping her tightly. "I love you, Story Princess. I want to live with you forever." Peter's expression seemed to echo his.

A pain wrenched her heart when she considered that Michael's days were numbered. "Why don't we pretend that today is forever." She tousled his fair hair before remembering that their father had counseled her to make sure Michael un-

derstood everything was make-believe. "After we finish the taping, I'm taking you to an early dinner, where we'll meet a group of other children and a very good friend of mine, who's going to entertain all of us."

A quiet message of happiness passed between the two brothers. Did Michael have any idea what the future held? she wondered. Their father's pain must be unbearable.

Before Domini knew it, it was four o'clock and time to go to the Space Needle Restaurant. When the meal and the magic performance had ended, the two boys ran to the windows to look out over the city of Seattle. Domini stood between them with her hands on their shoulders, amazed that Michael appeared to be holding up so well.

He looked up at Domini. "Where do you live?"

"Even I'd like the answer to that question," a familiar male voice said behind Domini. Dr. Wolfe gathered Michael up in one arm and put the other around Peter.

His presence unsettled her, but both boys immediately started giving him a full account of their activities and she thought herself safe from his scrutiny. His incredible blue eyes suddenly fastened on hers, holding her spellbound. "You were about to point out your home to us."

"It's there on Mercer Island."

Michael's eyes grew round. "You live on Mercer Island? We can come visit you all the time."

An expressionless mask slipped over his father's face. "The Story

Princess is a very busy person, Mike."

"She promised we could come and see her the next time we came to Seattle," Peter asserted quietly.

Although she couldn't understand it, Domini sensed that Dr. Wolfe wanted this day over, with no repeats. The day had been so perfect, she didn't want anything to mar it now. Sucking in her breath, she put on her brightest smile. "The day's not over yet. You won some prizes, and if your father will drive you back to the TV studio, I'll have some of my helpers bring them out to your car."

"Goody!" Michael clapped his hands enthusiastically while Peter beamed.

"Thank you for everything you've done. I'm sure this is a day the boys will remember all their lives," Dr. Wolfe interjected on a sincere note. "Goodbye, Story Princess." He took hold of his children's hands and walked toward the exit.

"Goodbye," the children called over their shoulders.

THE NEXT MORNING Domini found she couldn't bear her own company a minute longer and decided to go to work. It would distract her from thoughts of Dr. Wolfe. He created an excitement in her, an odd feeling of unrest. One moment she wished she'd never met him, the next she yearned to see him again.

The receptionist interrupted her later in the day. "Domini? A man

insists on speaking to the person in charge. He got me to admit the Story Princess was in the building and he said he'd wait till hell froze over if necessary in order to talk to you."

"By all means, show the gentleman inside, Marge." Within seconds Domini heard footsteps approach. A pair of angry blue eyes pierced hers. "Dr. Wolfe!" She nervously smoothed a silky black lock of hair from her cheek. "What's wrong?"

His shrewd eyes studied her movements. "I think you know exactly why I'm here, Miss Loring."

"Please...have a seat." She indicated one of the chairs opposite her, but he remained standing. His eyes practically bored through her.

"A colleague of mine at the hospital fell all over himself commiserating with my *pain* this morning."

"Everyone here shares your grief, Dr. Wolfe." Her voice sounded unsteady, despite her effort to control it.

"You'd do anything, say anything, to keep your face and name before the public, wouldn't you? And innocent children are your pawns." He gripped the edge of her desk and leaned over so their faces were mere inches apart. "All you have to do is issue a retraction, and we can both get on with our lives and pretend this experience was simply a bad dream. Otherwise you'll be involved in a lawsuit—and some very undesirable publicity." He wheeled around and started for the door.

"Dr. Wolfe!"

He checked his stride, glancing back at her in that disapproving manner he'd displayed almost from the first.

"What monstrous crime have I committed?"

"Maybe this will explain." He handed her the morning edition of a major Seattle paper.

There was a large picture of her with her arms around Peter and Michael. The caption read Story Princess Grants Wish To Dying Child.

"Pictured above with Seattle's own Story Princess are Michael and Peter Wolfe, sons of prominent physician Dr. Jarod Wolfe and the late Amanda Carlson, news reporter for KLPC. Many will recall the helicopter crash that took her life, leaving a grief-stricken family behind. Recently, tragedy has struck again, but it is hoped that Michael's visit to his beloved Story Princess brought some needed magic into his life."

Amanda Carlson was his wife? Domini remembered the tall blond woman, but they'd never met. Obviously Dr. Wolfe was still mourning his wife's death, on top of everything else.

"I—I'm sorry the media dredged up something so painful when you have Michael's illness to deal with." She didn't know what else to say.

"What illness?" he bit out. "My son is *not dying*."

"Michael isn't ill? He's not going to die?" A great wave of joy brought Domini to her feet. "But Peter said that Michael would be go-

ing to heaven soon, and... Dr. Wolfe, I think you'd better read Peter's letter."

Something in her voice must have reached him, because he stood motionless in the center of her office, his face noticeably pale. "May I see it?" he finally asked in a gravelly voice.

She plucked the letter with its attached original envelope from a file and handed it to him. Peter had lied about Michael's condition. This was borne out as Domini watched their father's mouth tighten, his pallor grow more pronounced. "Dear Lord," he groaned, "I had no idea..."

"I'll talk to Carter about printing a retraction in the newspaper, as well as making a statement on television." He nodded in a daze.

"I should have figured it out long before now," he muttered, almost to himself. "The reference to his mother explains a great deal. In that wig, you bear a superficial resemblance to Amanda."

Domini was inexplicably disturbed by his explanation. "Does Michael remember her at all?"

"No. She died when he was four months old." His voice held no trace of animosity, but it held no animation, either. The bleak look in his eyes told its own story. Amanda Carlson's death must have killed something inside Jarod Wolfe. The expression in his eyes was unreadable as he gave her back the letter. With a barely perceptible nod of his head, he left the office.

Domini leaned against the door-

jamb, limp from their meeting. Her joy at learning that Michael was perfectly healthy turned her whole world around. But Peter's lie had resulted in unexpected consequences.

Suddenly the idea of going home held no appeal. Maybe she'd drive to Tacoma and spend the weekend. Returning to her childhood home might ease the turmoil created by one Dr. Wolfe. No other man had ever affected her like this, incensing her one minute, leaving her breathless with longing the next. And the thought of never seeing him again was strangely depressing.

THE WEEKEND in Tacoma turned out to be the tonic Domini needed. As she entered the recording studio on Monday morning, Marge got up from her desk and hurried toward her.

"Dr. Wolfe is here again. He's waiting in your office."

Domini's heart began to thud. "Thanks, Marge," she murmured, unable to control the excitement welling up inside despite her attempts to quell it. She entered her office slightly flushed and out of breath. As his penetrating blue eyes assessed her in one sweeping glance, she felt momentarily thankful that she'd dressed this morning in her favorite plum suede suit.

"I've been phoning your home on Mercer Island all weekend, to no avail."

She raised her eyebrows slightly. "I've been in Tacoma with friends."

In an uncharacteristically hesitant manner, he ran both hands through his hair. "I need to apologize. I had no right to charge into your office on Friday and threaten you."

"I'm not so sure I wouldn't have done the same thing in your place, given the circumstances," she said after a short interval of silence.

"There must have been other letters besides Peter's that mentioned illness. Was it because of Amanda that you chose my son's letter?"

His question puzzled her. "Why would she have anything to do with my decision?"

"You might have chosen Peter's letter, knowing the press would capitalize on my wife's death in that helicopter crash."

Domini rubbed her forehead where she could feel the beginning of a headache. "I knew nothing about your wife. If I'd had any inkling of the relationship—particularly as we both worked for KLPC—I'd have been forced to choose another letter."

The very air seemed to vibrate with tension until he finally murmured, "I believe you."

Domini sighed deeply. "Did Peter tell you why he did it?"

His gaze locked with hers. "He said he wanted to help Michael win the contest, so he took my suggestion."

"What suggestion?"

He grimaced and rubbed the pad of his thumb along his lower lip. "I told him a child would have to be on his deathbed in order to win."

Domini blinked. "You honestly believed that, didn't you?"

"Did and still do. You know I'm right." Unexpectedly he smiled, and the warmth of his smile spread through her whole body.

"Knowing Michael would never get well influenced my decision to some degree, but there were many letters revealing problems as serious as his."

Dr. Wolfe sat down, propping both elbows on the arms of the chair. "What did Peter say that made the final difference?"

She flicked an imaginary piece of lint from the sleeve of her jacket. "I was afraid you'd ask that question."

A low laugh escaped him. "Live dangerously and tell me."

An unknowingly seductive smile curved the corners of her mouth. "I think the reference to my being a B-grade actress probably did the trick, possibly helped by the line that I craved attention."

"I have no excuse for the things I said about you," he admitted, shaking his head. "My children spent the most thrilling day of their lives with you last Thursday. I'd like to take you out for an evening as my way of saying thank-you. Are you free Wednesday night? I have tickets to *The Marriage of Figaro*."

Domini had been afraid he'd walk out of her life forever, and now she only had to make it to Wednesday night. Alive with excitement, she could scarcely believe he wanted to see her again. "I'd enjoy that very much."

"Good. I'll pick you up at seven."

"We'll be recording every night this week, but I should be able to slip away around seven-thirty and meet you at the opera house."

A flash of irritation came and went in his eyes, so fast she wasn't sure she'd really seen it. "Then I'll look for you outside the box office before curtain."

Domini had trouble settling down to work once Dr. Wolfe had gone. She knew that reading more into his invitation than a desire to make amends was probably foolish. But she was under the spell of his lazy smile, charmed by the way it had transformed his features. She wanted to see that smile again. In truth, she wanted to be the one responsible for it.

"WHERE DOES the in-crowd go these days to eat?" Jarod wanted to know as they pulled into the traffic after the opera.

His reference to the in-crowd must have been prompted by memories of his wife. Domini's smile faded. "I thought you might enjoy eating at a little bistro not far from here. Jorgio's wife makes a fabulous cheesecake, as well as Hungarian goulash that's out of this world. Jorgio was concertmaster of the Budapest chamber orchestra before he and Anna emigrated a few years ago. We've become good friends."

Her white cashmere coat protected her from the biting chill of the night air, but it wasn't responsible

for the languorous warmth that stole through her body when she brushed against Jarod Wolfe as he ushered her from the car to the restaurant.

"Delmonica!" Jorgio cried out his nickname for her as they entered the bistro. He kissed her on both cheeks, then showed them to a table in the corner and lit the candle that stood in the center of the crisp linen cloth.

Domini looked across the table at Dr. Wolfe. The flame of the candle seemed to burn a hot blue in his eyes. His gaze moved slowly over her, and she felt her skin heat, as though she'd moved too close to the flame.

A young man filled their wine-glasses and took their dinner orders. As he hurried away, Domini took a sip of wine, wondering if it was wise since she already felt intoxicated just being in the same room with Dr. Wolfe.

His eyes studied her moist red mouth. "The friends to whom you introduced me at intermission said you could have sung the lead in tonight's performance."

She nodded reflectively. "There was a time when I thought I'd pursue an opera career, but it turned out to be my father's dream more than mine."

"It isn't often that an opera singer's beauty measures up to her voice. You could have the whole world at your feet—not just the state of Washington."

Her hand tightened on the stem of her wineglass. "I have no interest in being a public figure, Dr. Wolfe. As

for beauty, it's all relative and where singing is concerned, it's the voice that's important."

His eyes flickered mysteriously. "Why don't we agree to differ on that point?"

The arrival of dinner prevented further conversation. Jorgio produced his violin and began to play a piercingly tender love song. The combination of music, wine and the nearness of the exciting man seated across from her put Domini in a rare state of euphoria.

"Tell me, did you pick *The Marriage of Figaro* for my sake, or yours?" she asked him as Jorgio moved to another table and they finished their meal.

"Both. I rarely take time off without the children. When I do, this is the kind of evening I enjoy most."

"It can't be easy to find enough time for everything you have to do."

"Well, it's certainly not the way I envisioned life when I married Amanda. Shall we go?" He'd already risen from the table. Obviously, talking about his wife had disturbed him.

It started raining as they drove across the bridge to Mercer Island, his car close behind hers. By the time she pulled into the driveway in front of her building the downpour had begun in earnest. Jarod knocked on her passenger-side window. Domini undid the lock and he quickly slid in, shutting the door. His arm stretched along the back of her seat and brushed the collar of

her coat. It was the merest touch, but she felt electrified.

"Thank you, Miss Loring. I've enjoyed this evening more than you know. You're a woman of many talents."

There it was again. The innuendo alongside the compliment, making her uneasy. "I have the feeling you didn't expect to enjoy the evening at all."

"Let's just say I'm beginning to see why my boys are so enamored of a total stranger."

Dr. Wolfe believed in being brutally honest, she realized. "I'd like to think your children and I became friends the other day, but it's obvious you don't approve of further contact."

"But if I forbid them to see you again, they'll never forgive me for it," he returned, idly fingering a black lock of hair curled against her neck. The slightest touch of his skin sent prickles of awareness through her body. "You were the magic that made their day one of enchantment."

His hand tightened in her hair, but she was positive he wasn't aware of it.

"Peter wants to see you again and explain himself," he said huskily before letting go of the silky tendrils curling around his fingers. She enjoyed the feel of his hand against her skin and wished he hadn't removed it. "I told the boys I'd drive them into Seattle next Sunday so they could spend some time with you. We could take in the Aquarium and

go for dinner somewhere along the waterfront."

"I'd love to spend time with Peter and Michael, but I'm leaving town on Sunday. I'll be away for three weeks. Perhaps when I come back?"

He removed his arm abruptly from the back of the seat. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to set a date right now—to soften the blow."

"I'm afraid I can't. Carter has arranged a tour of department stores in the Puget Sound area. Depending on the success of the tour, I might be gone longer than three weeks. But the minute I return to Seattle I'll call the boys."

He eyed her for a long moment before levering himself from the car. He pulled open her door and, without saying anything, walked her to the front door of her building.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," she said. "I'm looking forward to seeing the children again. I'll call them as soon as I know my plans. Good night."

"Good night." An onlooker might have been convinced by his smile, but Domini could see that it didn't reach his eyes. He didn't believe she'd keep her promise.

The man had gone to great lengths to make sure the boys would see her again, yet he intimated that he didn't trust her. So how could she want to feel those mocking lips against hers? How could she crave the touch of his hands in her hair?

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AFTER A RESTLESS night, Domini awakened early and hurried to the studio. She was preparing a series of new narrations and welcomed Carter's announcement that they'd be taping after hours every night. That way she'd be too exhausted to think. As it was, she jumped every time the phone rang, hoping to hear Jarod's deep voice, then chided herself for hoping.

On Friday night she submitted to the makeup artist, then got into the first of her various costumes. It seemed they'd never start taping, and she was fast losing her patience.

"You look good enough to eat," Allen said to her with a wink as he entered the studio dressed as her father, the king.

"You're embarrassing me," Domini insisted.

"You shouldn't look so gorgeous, then," Allen countered.

"Domini?" She heard her name called over the sound system. It was Carter. "There's someone who wants to see you in the control booth before we start taping."

Curious, Domini made her way to the booth, then paled when she caught sight of Dr. Wolfe. His deep blue eyes seemed to flare with an oddly fierce light as she approached him. Then he smiled, and she glimpsed a flash of white teeth more dazzling than his shirt.

"We've worked out a statement to give the press about Michael," Carter explained. "Dr. Wolfe asked

if he could see what actually goes on here at the studio."

Domini's pulse surged out of control. *What was his real reason for coming to the television studio?* "I'm afraid it's taking forever to get this under way tonight."

His eyes roved over her figure before returning to her face. "Don't worry about me, Miss Loring. I'm fascinated, if you want to know the truth."

"You may not feel the same way after you've been here an hour. If you like you can watch the video of the children's visit."

"I'd prefer to watch you tape the show, then perhaps we could view the movie together. Unless you have other plans."

Her breath caught. "No, I have no plans."

"Then I'll wait for you."

Within forty-five minutes Domini sat in the projection room with Dr. Wolfe, minus her costume and makeup.

"Despite the fact that you do look good enough to eat, it doesn't require medical training to see you're dead on your feet. Why do you push so hard?"

So he'd heard Allen clowning around! "Normally I don't," she said, getting up to turn on the machine. "When you know you're going to be gone for an extended period, don't you burn the candle at both ends in an effort to prepare for it?"

"Touché." He chuckled as she turned out the lights and sat down to watch the movie.

Michael's cherubic face lit up the screen as he threw himself into Domini's arms. The words, "I wish you were my mom. You're beautiful!" resounded in the dark intimacy of the room. Neither of them spoke as the movie revealed the joy of two children visiting a fairy-tale princess.

In an unexpected move, Dr. Wolfe rose to his feet and walked over to shut off the machine. "I don't think there are words to describe my feelings right now. All I can do is thank you for this gift, which I know the family will treasure."

Domini got up and turned on the light. Their eyes met across the room. "Getting to know your children was a privilege. I tried to call the boys the other day—to assure them that we'll get together soon."

He frowned, his manner suddenly wary.

"Did I do the wrong thing?"

"Not if you meant it."

"And you don't think I did?"

He frowned again and his features darkened. "I'm concerned about Peter. He understands that what he did was wrong, and until he faces you, I doubt that life around our house will ever be the same. Now he's waiting for your call, which may or may not come."

"Do you honestly think I'd do that to the children?" Her voice shook with emotion.

He pulled the tape from the machine and moved toward the door. "I don't doubt that you believe what you say. But your work, which you

do better than anyone else I can possibly imagine, will always come first with you. Peter doesn't understand that." He paused. "Good luck on the tour. And thank you for this." With video in hand he left the projection booth.

She stood there, immobilized by too many emotions. Peter's letter came to mind. *My dad says...all you crave is attention.* Their dinner out had been a token gesture, after all.

A WEEK into the tour Domini came down with a head cold. All further appearances had to be canceled. She phoned Carter from her hotel room, apprising him of the situation. He told her to take a week off to recuperate, to pamper herself. But more than anything in the world she wanted to see Peter and Michael again. And, if she dared to admit it, she wanted to see Dr. Wolfe. He was a man like no other man she'd ever met in her life. And at twenty-seven, she shouldn't be reacting with such weak-kneed excitement at the mere thought of another meeting with him!

Domini called ahead to make a reservation at the Coast Inn in Bremerton for the following day and enjoyed the luxury of being driven there in the company limousine. She arrived at the hotel late in the afternoon.

As soon as she was shown to her room, she put through a call to Dr. Wolfe's home. She left word that she'd checked in to the hotel and

would like to speak to Peter when it was convenient.

After a long soak in the bathtub, Domini slipped into a green-and-blue silk jersey dress and let herself out of the room. She craved something hot and wet to soothe her raw throat.

A dark-haired man bounded up the stairs two at a time as she started to descend them. Unexpectedly he paused when he reached the first landing, and she gasped as their gazes collided. It was Dr. Wolfe!

The first thing that struck her was the intense blue of his eyes fastened unswervingly on her. If she'd had any doubts about her feelings for this man, she could put them to rest now. His gaze passed with disturbing thoroughness over the high spots of color in her cheeks, the curves of her body, the dress swirling around her slender legs. If she hadn't known better, Domini could almost have imagined he was equally excited to see her. "I—I didn't mean to take you away from whatever you were doing." Haltingly, she started down the stairs toward him.

"The boat dock is in constant need of repair and I like any excuse that takes me away from it," he explained as she drew closer. "I wasn't aware your tour extended to Bremerton."

Did she detect a trace of mockery in his tone? she wondered. His nearness disturbed her far too much. "My tour was canceled. I decided this was a good time to visit Peter."

His searching gaze roamed over her face and a frown marred his fea-

tures. "You're sick. How long have you been congested?"

"A few days."

He stared at her through shuttered eyes. "The boys know you're in town," he told her, then glanced at his thick gold wristwatch. "I'll run by the house and get them. We'll come back and join you for dinner in the hotel dining room. You shouldn't be outside in this weather, and I suggest you go to bed right afterward. I'll bring you something for your cold when I come back."

She tried to step past him, but he put a detaining hand on her arm. "Domini..." The sound of her name on his lips, more than the physical restraint, caused her to turn a pale face toward him. Lines darkened his features. His thumb traced circles on her heated skin. "The fact that you put yourself out for Peter's sake, when you should be home taking care of yourself, means more than you know." His hand seemed to slide away from her arm with reluctance. "I'll be back with the boys in a few minutes."

He dashed off, leaving a stunned Domini grasping the railing for support. She felt sure that he never planned to see her again once Peter had made his peace with her. The knowledge filled her with a real sense of loss, a kind of physical and mental agony from which she didn't think she'd ever recover. Not when she'd fallen so deeply in love with him.

*

"WHERE IS SHE?"

Domini whirled around, more excited to see the children than she would have believed possible. But her spontaneous smile faded as she watched two pairs of bright blue eyes scan the dining room. It dawned on her that they supposed she was a blonde because they'd never seen her except in full costume and wig.

Jarod's unnerving gaze found hers across the room. Her eyes must have signaled her distress because he bent and whispered something to the boys. They both looked her way at the same time, but still seemed hesitant.

"Should I go back for my wig?" She smiled tenderly as she walked toward them and held out her hands. Michael clutched his father's arm and stared, but Peter stepped forward and shook one hand, his eyes not quite meeting hers.

"Hello, Miss Loring." He bit his lip. "I—I'm sorry for what I did," he blurted out unexpectedly, a sheen of tears coating his eyes.

Compassion for the boy made her throat close up. "Do you know," Domini said, "I can't remember what you did. And once I can't remember something, I can never remember it again. How about a hug, Peter? I've missed you." He needed no prodding this time and grasped her around her slender waist. He tipped his head back, and the smile he flashed filled her with happiness. For a fraction of a second she caught

Jarod Wolfe's glance. Unbelievably, his eyes were sending her a message of gratitude.

They were soon seated. The waitress came to the table and started taking orders. As soon as she'd left, the conversation focused on the boys' plans to spend the next day with Domini.

"We want to take you to Bainbridge Island, Miss Loring. Is that all right with you, Dad?"

Jarod nodded. "Provided she's well enough, Peter, which I seriously doubt." But his comment didn't dampen their spirits as they made their plans.

WHEN THE PHONE rang the next morning, Domini awoke with a shock. She reached for the receiver and said hello. Her voice was two registers lower than normal.

"You sound exactly as I expected," Jarod answered. "Were you able to sleep?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"Are you still feverish?"

Domini didn't need to feel her cheeks to know she still had a temperature. "I think it's down," she lied. "I'm really feeling much better after the good night's sleep. I—I'm sure I won't need anything, but thank you for all your help and concern."

There was a slight pause. "All the thanks I want is to see you feeling better so you can go over to the island with the boys and then back to your work in Seattle." He said goodbye and rang off.

Domini sat up in the bed, still clutching the receiver. He couldn't wait to see the last of her!

Well, he was going to get his wish. By evening she'd be on her way back to Seattle. But first she planned to spend some time with the children!

DOMINI FELT a positively maternal twinge as she watched the boys scramble out of the family car and run toward her. She waved to Mrs. Maughan, the Wolfes' housekeeper, before hugging Peter and Michael and ushering them into the ferry terminal. Michael jumped up and down with excitement as they lined up to board the vessel, which would take them to Seattle, where they'd transfer to the ferry for Bainbridge Island.

"I'm glad you're feeling better today," Peter said as they watched the ferry move away from the dock. "Daddy said you'd have to stay in bed today."

"That's because he thought I'd be worse, but as you can see, I'm fine." The smiles on their faces left nothing to the imagination.

Peter and Michael chatted non-stop as the three of them wandered in and out of the island's stores. They had a leisurely lunch, although Domini could barely manage tea and toast. Michael and Peter were so excited by the day's activities, they didn't notice how weak she'd become as they boarded the ferry for the return trip to Bremerton. It was

a fight to make them wear their life preservers, but when she explained that she loved them and wanted to know they were all right when they were out of her sight, they yielded to her entreaty. Then, sounding just like his father, Peter insisted she wear one, too. A smile lifted the corner of her drawn mouth despite her misery as she conceded his point and donned an adult life preserver.

Domini watched the children for almost an hour, then wandered out on deck for some fresh air. The ferry seemed to be marooned in a sea of fog. Suddenly, the foghorn blasted, making her jump. It was quickly followed by another long series of blasts and then the ship's siren. In that instant she saw the bow of another vessel ram the back of the ferry. At the moment of impact the ferry staggered, rose up and then plunged downward. Domini didn't have the strength to hang on to the railing and felt herself being thrown headlong into the churning waters. Her horrified scream came out as a gurgle as a wall of seawater closed over her head. The last thing she remembered, before everything went black, was the children.

DOMINI forced open her eyes and discovered herself lying on a gurney with an oxygen mask over her face. She was wheeled into the emergency wing, where nurses and doctors had converged to aid the victims. The attending physician assured her that everything humanly possible was being done to locate

the children, as well as Dr. Wolfe. But she wouldn't be consoled. The minutes stretched into hours.

Domini lay there in mental agony. If anything had happened to either of the boys, life wouldn't be worth living. She closed her eyes and prayed harder than she'd ever prayed in her life. She'd rather die than see the look on Jarod's face if anything had happened to his children.

She heard the sound of the curtains being pushed aside, and struggled to raise herself onto her good arm. A tall figure wearing a white lab coat and stethoscope moved to the side of the bed. Domini looked up into familiar blue eyes, now shadowed with intense pain. "Jarod!"

*

HER FRIGHTENED EYES searched his, and what she read there caused something to shrivel inside her. "The children—"

"They're fine, Domini. They're home eating dinner with Mrs. Maughan at this very moment. The harbor master found them perched on top of the piano in the lounge, waiting for the lifeboats. Their feet never even got wet."

She made a funny little noise in her throat. "The piano?" In her mind's eye she could see the ancient baby grand in a corner of the lounge.

The rigid mouth of a moment ago relaxed into a grin. "I've taught the

boys well. Always go for the high ground."

He couldn't possibly joke like this if he weren't telling the truth. It shone from his brilliant blue eyes and dissolved her burden of guilt and anguish. "Thank God, Jarod." A little sob escaped. "Th-they're safe."

"They are." Then his dark head lowered and the mouth she'd hungered for closed over hers in a kiss of unexpected gentleness. It didn't last long enough.

The tenderness of his touch was almost her undoing as he smoothed the limp black tendrils from her forehead. "There's a possibility you've come down with pneumonia, but don't be frightened." He followed the line of her cheeks, her jaw with the back of his finger. "I won't let anything happen to you."

She was grateful for his concern about her physical condition. But his words, his touch, had started a fierce new ache, one that X rays couldn't discern and penicillin couldn't cure.

"I'm going to see if they've got your test results," he said abruptly, and turned to leave.

She called him back. "Jarod?"

He looked anxiously in her direction and moved to her side immediately. "What is it?"

She moistened her dry lips. "Would it be too much trouble to phone Carter?"

Her request froze him into immobility. For a moment he said nothing, but his mouth went white around the edges. "Do you need him, Domini?"

A strange tension pervaded the atmosphere, as if her answer mattered in some way she didn't understand. "No," she finally said, "but he's in the process of making plans for me to go to Spokane to do another Story Princess tour. If he could simply be notified that I might need another week before I can go home..."

Jarod's blue eyes glittered dangerously. "It's time Carter Phillips realized you've been overextending yourself and *this* is the result!" He stood there like an avenging prince. "Television shows and personal appearances — recording — contests... When is there time for Domini Loring *the woman*?"

Domini blinked. Did he really envision her life like that? "I came here to visit the children and enjoy myself."

"And when you fulfilled your obligation to the boys, you'd hurry back to Phillips and all his plans for you."

She closed her eyes in frustration. "That wasn't my intention, Jarod."

He raked a hand through his dark hair. "You couldn't wait to be gone from here. You disobeyed my advice and you lied through your teeth when you told me your temperature was down."

"Because I didn't want to disappoint the children by staying in bed all day." Which was true enough. She couldn't possibly tell him her *real* reason—or he'd know she was hopelessly in love with him. She couldn't confess that she wanted

him so desperately, it was pure torture to be close to him.

"Dr. Wolfe? We're ready in X ray." A young orderly addressed Jarod. For Domini, the intrusion couldn't have come at a more welcome moment.

BETWEEN PAINKILLERS for her injured arm and medication for her cough, Domini slept on and off for the next forty-eight hours, scarcely cognizant of what went on around her. When she was awake, it occurred to her that Jarod might be right about her driving herself too hard. It *had* been several years since she'd done anything that even resembled taking a vacation. When she recovered from this, she'd arrange a holiday and go lie on a beach somewhere, just soaking up sun. And maybe, by some miracle, she'd learn to live without Jarod Wolfe.

The third morning she awakened to a room full of flowers. Her eyes misted over as she read the cards and expressions of love from everyone at the studio.

Jarod appeared at noon, smiling mysteriously. All at once he produced an exquisite little tree brimming with blood-red rosebuds. A few had burst into bloom. Hands trembling, she reached for the card. It read, "For a real live princess. Love, Peter and Michael."

She leaned forward and buried her nose in the flowers. The miniature roses were a marvel. No doubt the boys had wanted to do some-

thing for her, but it had been Jarod who'd conceived of such an unusual and beautiful gift. "The rose tree is beautiful and I adore it."

As she spoke, he was busy making a place for it among the other flowers on the utility table. Then he approached the bed and stood there, studying her chart. "I have the results of your tests."

"And?" Her heartbeat quickened.

"That's my present." He lifted his head and for the second time, looked directly into her eyes. "You don't have pneumonia."

"Thank heaven!" A full, unguarded smile broke out on her face.

The smile he gave her in return suddenly transformed his whole face. "There's more to my present. I'm taking you home with me."

"What did you say?"

"You have bronchitis. Barring any complications, you should start to improve in a couple of weeks if you obey my orders and do nothing but rest."

"I know how much you dislike being in the hospital, so I thought you'd do better at the house. If you're under my roof, I'll know my instructions are being carried out."

Domini looked away, unable to take it all in. Her wildest dream was about to come true. But the instant she realized this, she was already mourning the day she'd have to leave and go back to Seattle. She knew instinctively that it would be like tearing her heart from her body.

"Is the idea so distasteful to you?"

The abruptness of his question brought her head around. She was afraid to hope, even for a moment, that she'd detected hurt in his voice. "It would disrupt your whole life to have me there."

He rubbed his chin. "What if I told you Peter sees this as a way to make up for everything that's happened?"

Domini didn't understand. "He's already apologized."

"He feels responsible because he's the one who brought up the outing to Bainbridge in the first place."

Her eyes widened. Poor Peter. "But that's absurd. If anything, I'm the one who should be begging forgiveness for putting your children in such terrible danger in the first place."

His mouth hardened. "You couldn't have predicted the freak accident that caused the collision. No one could have. I think everyone might heal if you come to our home to recuperate. All debts will be paid in full."

Their eyes caught and held. "If you're sure this will help Peter and won't cause you too much trouble, I can't imagine anything more wonderful than being surrounded by my two favorite children and Bremerton's most celebrated doctor." Her smile widened mischievously. "The nurses gossip nonstop about you, Jarod. You must know that."

He rolled his eyes. "Obviously, the sooner I get you out of here the better. I prescribe plenty of rest,

freedom from responsibility, good food and fresh sea air."

"If you treat me like royalty, you might not be able to get rid of me when the time comes. Have you thought of that?" She had to make a joke of it or go a little mad.

"You'd receive no dissenting vote from the children's corner. I can assure you of that."

"Won't my presence in your home create unwanted gossip?"

"I hope so." He threw her a heart-stopping smile. "It's good for my image, and no one will guess there's a real princess hiding in the wolf's lair..."

His teasing disturbed her and she decided not to respond to it. He moved over to the door. "While the nurse prepares you for travel, I'll find someone to help load all these flowers."

"Maybe the nurses can give them to some of the other patients. The only gift I want is the rose tree."

He went very still. "You're sure?"

"If I can keep it alive until summer, I'd like to take it to Tacoma and plant it in the front flower bed."

One eyebrow arched. "Your family home?"

"Yes. There are too many good memories associated with it to sell it. I try to go there as often as I can."

He seemed pensive. "I went through your bags to find something for you to wear today. You travel lightly for a woman."

She took a deep breath. "I'm the

Story Princess. All I really need is my costume."

Rich laughter rumbled out of him. "I never thought I'd live to see the day I'd hear a woman say that. You're so full of surprises I can't keep up with you." With that, he strode out the door.

JAROD'S HOME came as a total surprise. The multistoried dwelling sat at the end of a winding drive lined with rhododendrons and lush vegetation—a dove-gray structure blending traditional warmth with modern simplicity. Jarod parked the car and turned to Domini. "Let's get you inside and settled before the children descend." With that male grace so characteristic of him, he helped Domini from the car, then picked her up in his arms, rose tree and all. His body provided warmth against the biting cold.

"I can walk," she whispered, acutely aware of his mouth hovering inches from her own. If she lifted her head a fraction...

The strong breeze off the Sound seemed to cut right through her. In the distance she heard the mournful sound of a foghorn and shuddered in remembrance.

Jarod's arms tightened around her. "You're safe now." He read her mind with practiced ease and held her closer to his heart.

Ice crunched underfoot as he walked the short distance to the entry of the house. In a few strides he carried her down a hallway that opened into a sunken living room

dominated by a stone fireplace. Domini was struck by the clean lines and the mood of serenity. Then she gasped. Still carrying her, Jarod had drawn near the picture window that overlooked the huge bay. The room felt like an extension of the sea and sky, perched high on the hill like an eagle's aerie. "It's the most spectacular view I've ever seen."

His warm breath fanned her black curls. "You haven't been upstairs yet."

The husky tone of his voice excited her unbearably. She'd be in serious trouble, she thought, if he decided to take her vital signs right then.

A spiral staircase rose to a large loft at the opposite end of the room, but Domini had only a fleeting glimpse of it before Jarod carried her up a second flight of stairs to the master bedroom.

Her eyes immediately took in the wall of glass that revealed a sweeping panorama of sea and sky. A king-size bed rested against another wall opposite a fireplace. She could feel the warmth of the fire crackling merrily behind a polished brass fire-screen.

If anything, the view from this altitude was even more stunning, but all Domini could see were the lines of Jarod's handsome face reflected in the glass. He set her gently on the bed that had been turned down to expose powder-blue sheets, then took the rose tree from her and placed it on a highboy dresser.

"Jarod, I can't take your room." But even as she argued, he tucked

the covers around her, forcing her to sink back into the down pillows.

He stood gazing down at her, legs slightly apart, hands on his hips. "The boys have been begging me to sleep in the loft with them since we moved here. Besides, I hope that as you look out the window day after day, you'll come to love the seascape—and not shudder like you did a few minutes ago."

She felt the tears start, and turned her head away from him.

"Try to sleep for a while. I'll peek in later, and if you're awake I'll let the boys come up to see you for a few minutes while you eat your dinner. Now lie back and think of Little Miss Henny Penny."

She laughed out loud at that remark. It precipitated a cough. "Did you say that on purpose?"

"You've got to get rid of the congestion, and laughter's still the best medicine I know. I'll be up later."

She turned over on her stomach to relax. For the first time in years she knew what it felt like to be cherished. *What would it be like to be Jarod's wife? To never have to say good-night or goodbye?*

*

MUFFLED WHISPERS and hushed voices greeted Domini. She rolled over and discovered three pairs of blue eyes trained expectantly on her. Unable to help herself, she let her gaze swerve to Jarod. "I think I know how Goldilocks felt."

"Wrong bed, wrong hair color, but I'm not complaining." Jarod

stood against the bedpost with his arms folded, bigger than life and looking pleased with the world. Domini couldn't remember seeing him in this carefree mood before. It took years off his age and gave her a glimpse of a younger Jarod.

Michael sat on her lap while Peter rested on his knees next to her legs, a look of anxiety on his face. "Daddy said you're too sick to read us stories tonight," Michael said.

Domini wrapped her arms around him and hugged him close. "He's right. All my voice is good for right now is the tuba section." Her comment sent the boys into gales of laughter. "But if you bring one of my records in here; we could play it and you could pretend I'm talking in person."

Michael quickly slid off her lap and charged out the bedroom door, almost colliding with Mrs. Maughan, who was carrying Domini's dinner tray.

Jarod excused himself because of an urgent phone call. Domini ate her dinner while the boys regaled her with details of the ferry accident. Then they put on the record and nestled down among the quilts to listen. One record led to another until both children had fallen asleep. When Mrs. Maughan looked in, Domini waved her away. Then, feeling sleepy herself, she closed her eyes. They flew open when she heard Jarod mutter an epithet.

He looked out of sorts and had changed from his turtleneck to a sport shirt that was unbuttoned half

way, revealing a powerful chest, shaded by dark hair.

"Please don't be upset," Domini whispered. "The boys haven't been any problem. We've all slept, actually."

He walked to the bed and felt her forehead while he took her pulse with his other hand. "I won't allow the situation in my own home to set you back." His tone brooked no argument. His attention fastened on Michael, who moved in his sleep to snuggle a little closer to her. "Even knowing who you are, *what* you are, I'm having difficulty remembering you didn't give birth to my children."

His words wounded her in a manner that went beyond tears. Domini eased Michael out of her arms and turned on her side as Jarod reached for his son. Inside of a few minutes, he'd put both boys to bed.

Domini slept on and off during the next day. She didn't hear from the children until bedtime when they came in to talk briefly and say good-night. Mrs. Maughan remained in the room and hustled them out the door after ten minutes.

That first day set a pattern for the next few weeks. She saw next to nothing of Jarod except when he examined her throat and checked her arm. The memory of that one warm kiss in the emergency room, the touch of his hands on her face, might have been a dream after all.

With so many long, empty hours to fill, Domini prevailed upon Mrs. Maughan to buy her skeins of wool and some knitting patterns. She be-

gan to work on Christmas stockings and handknit sweaters for Jarod and the boys.

But her mind and heart dwelt constantly on Jarod. He'd asked her about *Domini Loring, the woman*. That question had gone around in her mind for two weeks, and finally the woman in her had come to acknowledge what she yearned for above all else: Jarod's love.

On Wednesday afternoon of her third week in the Wolfe household, the sun broke through the clouds. Fresh from the shower, wearing a pink silk wrapper, Domini paused to gaze out the floor-to-ceiling window. When she heard a knock on the bedroom door she didn't interrupt her vigil as she told Mrs. Maughan to come in.

"Incredible sight, isn't it?" Jarod's entry into the bedroom was so unexpected, she could scarcely find her voice. He stood close enough that his breath stirred the damp tendrils on her neck, and she felt light-headed at his nearness. "I never tire of the view."

She trembled. "You're never home this time of day. Is something wrong?"

"No. I'm leaving for Seattle in a few minutes and wanted to check on you first, since I won't be back until Sunday night. I'm taking the weekend to get my Christmas shopping done, and I don't want the boys to know about it. I realize that the enforced inactivity in a backwater like ours must be the ultimate nightmare for you," he continued, "but soon—"

"Nightmare?" She rounded on him. "Everyone's made me feel cherished. It's a wonderful feeling."

"That's an interesting choice of words, Domini."

She didn't try to keep the hurt out of her voice. "Mock me all you want, Jarod, since it seems to give you so much pleasure, but I mean what I say."

"You couldn't be more wrong," he said almost angrily. "Don't you know how much I want to make love to you? How much I want to kiss you...?"

Nothing could compare with the exquisite pleasure of his mouth as it descended on hers. The driving force of his kiss broke down all the barriers between them, robbing her of strength, so that she clung to him. Her little moaning sounds seemed to incite him. He drank deeply from her mouth, pressing her even closer as she wrapped her arms around his neck, wanting to give everything that had been locked inside her for so long. He drew the very breath from her body and she gasped at the sensation of his lips against the scented hollow of her throat. "If you kiss me any more, I think I might die of pleasure."

"Do you want me to stop?" He sounded as if he'd been running a very long distance.

She turned her head, unknowingly giving him her answer, for suddenly his mouth closed over hers once more and she was lost. Their hunger for each other shocked her to the very soul. This was no bland embrace, no mere solace. Jarod

seemed as consumed by the fire that blazed between them as she was. She loved Jarod to the depth of her being and couldn't prevent herself from showing him that he was life itself to her. No kiss was long enough, deep enough.

"Daddy's home!" Michael's excited voice floated up the staircase into the bedroom. Domini tore her lips from Jarod's as Michael came running into the bedroom with Peter not far behind.

"Daddy! What are you doing?" The little boy stood staring at the two of them. Jarod's hands slid reluctantly from her body, finally allowing her to escape to the bathroom.

"I was kissing Domini, Michael."

Domini marveled that Jarod could sound so reasonable when they'd both gone far beyond the point of coherent thought. She looked in the mirror and a different woman stared back, one with her hair in wanton disarray, a rosy flush on her throat and cheeks, a mouth swollen from ardent lovemaking.

When she emerged from the bathroom dressed in wool pants and a blouse, Jarod was nowhere to be found, but the children were waiting for her in the bedroom.

"Domini? Were you kissing Daddy goodbye?" Michael asked earnestly.

"Children—" Her voice caught. "I'm not going anywhere until your father says I'm well enough."

"Did you kiss him because you love him?"

Peter's persistence caught her off guard. "I care about all of you," she murmured, grasping both their hands. "And while he's away, I think we should make some plans for Christmas. It's only twelve days away." Michael's attention was easily diverted, but Peter had a stubborn streak like his father.

"Are you going to be here for Christmas?"

Domini smiled at Peter. "I wouldn't want to be anyplace else." Because it was so obviously the truth, Peter seemed mollified. "I didn't see a Christmas tree when I went downstairs earlier," she went on. "Why don't we order one, since I can't go outside? We'll get it all decorated so when your daddy comes home, it'll be the first thing he sees when he walks in the living room. And when we've finished the tree, we'll talk about what we're going to buy your daddy and Mrs. Maughan for Christmas." Her suggestion produced cries of joy. The boys chattered all the way downstairs as they made their way to the kitchen, where Mrs. Maughan was busy preparing their evening meal.

Later that night, after tossing and turning for a quarter of an hour, Domini got up out of bed and wandered over to the window. Everything in her cried out to reassure the boys that if it were up to her, she'd stay forever. She couldn't love them more if they were her own children. But until Jarod could admit that the passion they'd shared had been no temporary assuagement of appetite, she had to remain silent.

He wasn't the kind of man to make love to a woman if he didn't have feelings for her. Domini felt sure of that. At least she had the satisfaction of knowing he desired her. But she wanted him to love her.

Finally her eyelids grew heavy and she went back to bed, wondering if Jarod was in bed, too, and if his sleep was as restless as hers.

She awakened the next morning bright and early and went downstairs to help Mrs. Maughan get the children off to school. Then she got to work, and by late afternoon the house looked like a Christmas card. Fresh greenery and flowers combined with the smell of spicy gingerbread, adding to the children's enchantment as they raced through the front door after school, calling Domini's name. Together they decorated the tree, stringing lights from the bottom and working up as far as they could reach.

"Peter? Look at all those cookies!" Michael whispered in awe as they entered the kitchen for dinner. Each gingerbread man had a red ribbon run through a hole at the top.

"After we eat, we can begin decorating them to hang on the tree. The larger cookies are for your friends," Domini explained.

After dinner the boys set to work creating their individual masterpieces with icing, sprinkles and glitter. There were plenty of mishaps; and several cookies found their way into tummies.

"I hope you saved some for me. I'm starving."

Domini froze as she heard the fa-

miliar male voice. Her heart began to hammer painfully in her chest as she and the children whirled around to see Jarod standing there in his overcoat, hair still damp from the light rain outside.

"You can have this one," Michael offered magnanimously, and Jarod promptly devoured it, flicking his gaze in her direction at last.

She dusted the flour from her hands. "I—we thought you weren't coming home until Sunday."

"I thought so, too," he murmured. His eyes were everywhere, warm and searching, the way they'd been yesterday afternoon, when he'd come to the bedroom. "The aroma of fresh gingerbread must be the reason I drove all the way home, even though I should've stayed in Seattle."

"Daddy? Did you see the stockings Domini made for us?" By this time Michael was in his father's arms, patting his cheeks.

"I saw everything, Mike, and I thought that I'd returned to Santa's workshop. It looks like some elves have been very busy."

Michael laughed happily. "Domini's not an elf, Daddy. You're silly."

Startling blue eyes swept over Domini. "No, you're right, Mike. But you have to admit there's a magic to everything she does." His words should have suffused her with joy, but his eyes looked puzzled, even haunted.

Domini felt Jarod's penetrating glance on her as Mrs. Maughan served him his dinner. His eyes

seemed to be asking a question—one she had no idea how to answer. It cast a pall on the night's festivities.

Mrs. Maughan finally disappeared from the kitchen, taking the boys with her, and Jarod got up from the table, gathering up the last of the dishes.

"Tell me something, Domini," he murmured. "Does Christmas always bring out your domestic instincts? Or is this a momentary aberration?"

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"AN ABERRATION, of course," she said, trying to continue the joke that wasn't really a joke. Then another thought occurred to her. "Are you trying to tell me I've overstepped the bounds in your home?"

Domini gasped softly when she felt Jarod's hands on her shoulders, kneading with gentle pressure. "I'm sorry," he whispered in a husky voice. "I offended *you*, when in my clumsy way I meant to compliment you for bringing the spirit of Christmas back into this house. Forgive me?" By this time he had moved around to cradle her flushed face in his hands.

Domini lifted troubled green eyes to his. "Of course I forgive you...."

His mouth descended on hers, and once more she was caught in a world where coherent thought ceased and only sensual need remained. She'd been aching for this rapture since yesterday, but now Jarod's lovemaking was starting a

new fire that made her forget where they were.

"He's kissing her again," Michael murmured from a crack in the doorway.

Jarod broke their kiss and moved away, taking a deep breath. Domini turned to grasp the counter for support. Unbelievably, she felt his arms slide around her from behind. "Do you have any idea how much I want you?" he whispered. For a moment they simply stood together, relishing the closeness of their bodies. It took a knock on the kitchen door to effect a separation.

"I'm coming, Mike," he said on a low groan. Domini didn't dare look at him for fear she wouldn't be able to let him go. Her desire for Jarod had transferred itself into actual pain that only his lovemaking could relieve. It was agony to pull away.

Once or twice during the final decorating of the tree Jarod gave her a secret smile that sent her pulses racing. Each time she had to look away, knowing hectic color filled her cheeks.

"It's beautiful," the children murmured, as they stood back to survey their work. "Sing 'The Night Before Christmas'!" the boys begged Domini.

She acted her way through the song, and everyone joined in to sing, "Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good-night." As her voice faded the boys leaped from the couch and ran to hug her. After more kisses, Jarod urged them upstairs and told

Domini to stay put. He'd be back down shortly.

In her dreamy, euphoric state, Domini curled up on the couch and stared at the Christmas-tree lights, thinking she'd never been so happy. But the ringing of the telephone shattered her bliss. Her disappointment was more than she could believe when she saw the withdrawn look on Jarod's face as he entered the living room.

"It's Carter Phillips on the phone, Domini. Since I know you have a lot to talk about, I'll go to the hospital—I should have driven over earlier as it is."

"Jarod?" Her voice faltered as she followed him to the front door. "Shall I wait up for you?"

A nerve hammered along his jaw as he put on his overcoat. "If I'm not home within a half hour, you'll know there were complications," he stated, effectively shutting her out. "Good night, Domini."

"Good night," she murmured, half sobbing as she heard the click of the front door. The finality of that sound forced her to face the inescapable fact that Jarod had no intention of returning early so they could pick up where they'd left off.

Domini tossed and turned half the night, wondering why Carter's phone call should create such a change in Jarod's behavior, and anxious for morning to come so she could talk to him. But by accident or design, there never seemed to be a moment during the following week when they were alone.

On Thursday the children were

invited to a sleepover and Jarod was in Seattle, having driven there on Tuesday. Just when Domini would have relished a houseful of company, everyone had gone. Under the circumstances, she urged Mrs. Maughan to go to her daughter's. After some friendly argument, the housekeeper agreed, promising to return the following afternoon.

Domini curled up on the couch to read a thriller, but couldn't concentrate. She put down her book and stared into the growing darkness with a heavy heart. Some part of Jarod didn't like her, and another part still loved his wife—a fatal combination. Domini decided she had no choice but to leave Bremerton the day after Christmas.

The hours passed with agonizing slowness. At ten, Domini turned off the television and went upstairs. The moon shone cold and clear, casting its reflection on the darkened water. Domini paused at the loft window to absorb the view. Unable to tear herself away, she sank down on the lower bunk of the boys' bed to watch and listen to the sounds of the night. At some point her eyelids grew heavy and she fell back against the mattress into a deep sleep.

Later that night she sat up with a start. Jarod was calling her name. Without her watch, she had no idea what time it was, but apparently he'd decided to come back from Seattle without telling anyone.

"Jarod?" Sliding quickly off the bunk bed, she turned toward the hall. Jarod must have seen the movement out of the corner of his

eye because he left his bedroom and came to an abrupt halt in the loft. His eyes moved slowly to her throat and then her shoulder, partially exposed by the wrinkled sweater.

"When I couldn't find you, I thought you'd gone," he murmured thickly. "It didn't occur to me that you'd be in *here*."

"I—I had no idea you were coming back tonight. I was drawn by the view on my way up to bed. Since the children were sleeping over at a friend's—"

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are?" His voice was rough, almost harsh. "I've gone out of my mind wondering how to stay away from you, but I don't know how to fight it anymore. Help me," he asked raggedly.

"Do you want me to go?" she questioned softly, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice.

He shook his head hopelessly. "You don't understand. I want to touch you again, but if I do, I won't be able to stop, and there are too many reasons why I can't let that happen."

"Is it something I've done?" She took a step forward, beseeching him with her eyes.

"Domini..." Her name came out a tortured whisper. "In...in the emergency room at the hospital when you'd barely arrived—suffering from hypothermia, not to mention bronchitis—you were worrying about that blasted job instead of taking care of yourself."

Hot color rose to her cheeks. "Are you trying to tell me, Dr.

Wolfe, that you wouldn't have wanted the clinic or the hospital to know of your whereabouts?" She shook her head in exasperation. "I like my job! At times I even love it! Music's my life!"

A nerve pulsed along his jaw. "Your words prove to me that my reasons for not getting involved are valid. It would be futile to discuss them."

If he'd slapped her face, he couldn't have made it clearer that he could never love her. The finality of his voice devastated her. "I think it would be best if I left first thing in the morning."

"Domini..." Everything in Domini cried out for him to stop her. His mouth thinned to a white line. "It will be easier on the boys if we drive you home to Mercer Island in the morning. I'll explain that you have work commitments."

"I think that's probably the best idea," she muttered, dashing up the stairs to the bedroom. She began packing, and didn't break down until her hands caressed the lace-and-satin bed jacket Jarod and the children had given her for a get-well present. Then she lay down on the bed and buried her face in it as great, heaving sobs racked her body.

The next morning the ride to Mercer Island was silent and tense, with only Michael accompanying them. Jarod unloaded Domini's case, then stood a moment looking at her.

His handsome face seemed a distorted version of itself and his beautiful eyes were hooded. "I wish the Story Princess a long and healthy

reign—please believe that.” He put some gift-wrapped packages from him and the children on the floor beside her bags. “Goodbye, Domini.”

*

“HAPPY NEW YEAR, Carter—even if it is almost February!”

“Dom! You’re back!” His piercing black eyes took swift inventory. “Was Hawaii up to your expectations?”

“I had a marvelous time. But I’d like to discuss my schedule with you.”

“Sit down. Let’s talk.”

Domini took a chair opposite his desk. “First, I want to thank you for giving me a leave of absence. I needed that month on the beach. That bout of illness has made me realize I’m not doing myself any favors by working around the clock. And I’ve decided I’d like to work a four-day week so I can have a longer weekend off.”

Carter sat back in the chair, touching his fingertips together. “It occurred to me while you were gone that I can’t expect this to last forever. You created the Story Princess, it’s yours for as long as you want it, but—”

“But you’ve got someone else in mind,” she finished for him. Strangely enough, the idea didn’t bother her at all. “Helen?”

“I’ve thought of calling her the Story Pixie, because she’s pocket-size, and giving her more exposure.”

“We could alternate the weekly

shows!” Domini said enthusiastically. “Carter, I can’t thank you enough.”

When Domini returned to her apartment at the end of the day, she felt a tremendous sense of relief. Carter had been even more understanding than she’d imagined. While she ate a salad, she found herself staring at the beautiful rose tree she’d placed on the coffee table. The roses symbolized a time of supreme happiness, an ephemeral period of joy that had come to an end.

The doorbell rang. Domini opened the door, then sank weakly against it, clinging to the handle.

“Jarod.” She was too overcome by the brilliance of his eyes to think or move.

“May I come in?” The deep, rich voice resonated through her body. “We have to talk.”

Before she lowered her arm, he’d moved inside and shut the door behind him. “I thought you were in Spokane on tour,” he said tightly.

He’d been trying to locate her. Why? “I took your advice and went on a long vacation.” She finally dared to look at him.

He came closer, so close that she could breathe in his clean masculine scent. “Did you vacation alone?” He cupped her chin in his hand and lifted her face. Despite herself, the touch of his fingers sent tiny waves of delight through her body. “I have to know if another man has held you in his arms and made love to you since you left Bremerton. Do you have any idea the hell I’ve been

through wondering where you were, imagining you with someone else?"

Dazed by his admission, she lifted luminescent green eyes to him, but his dark head blotted out the light and his mouth claimed hers. The unrestrained hunger of his kiss made her feel limp with desire. Moaning his name, she gave him kiss for kiss, intoxicated by the feel of his warm flesh beneath her hands.

"Domini—" He cried out as a shudder passed through his powerful body. "I want you and I *know* you want me," he whispered huskily against her throat. His caresses grew more passionate. "Let me make love to you."

When he would have picked her up in his arms, Domini found the strength to back away and put some distance between them. He'd never once mentioned *loving* her. What he talked about was *wanting* her—nothing more than a night's gratification. But what about the rest of her life? What about the thousands of days and nights she'd lie alone in her bed when he didn't want her anymore? She wanted the right to share his whole life, not just a few stolen moments of ecstasy. She wanted his babies. His heart and soul.

"You're an exciting man, Jarod. And I can't deny that I'm...attracted to you. I couldn't hide it if I wanted to, but I'm not interested in casual affairs."

He looked furious. "Who said anything about an affair? I want you to be part of my life. We'll be dis-

creet so that when we're around the boys, they'll never know."

"What if I got pregnant?"

His eyes blazed with a new light. "Then I'd take care of you and the baby forever." His voice was hoarse. "Domini—I need you."

She turned aside. "And what about my needs? The affair will end one day. I have to think about that—and the fact that I've never been with a man before. For me, it would be a tremendous step to take."

He caught her hands between his and kissed the palms with a sweet, seductive tenderness. "Do you mean to tell me you've never made love before?" he asked incredulously, pulling her close.

"You see, Jarod, there's quite a lot you don't know about me." Slowly she moved out of his arms and put some distance between them. "I want to come to you, but if I do, I might live to regret it. The answer has to be no."

His stillness told her more than all his arguments, all his protestations. "I won't ask again," he vowed.

"I know."

His blue eyes shot her a challenge that flickered, then died. In an instant he was gone.

February passed as the bleakest month Domini had ever known. She wondered if she would ever recover from the pain of losing Jarod. Only with the deaths of her parents had she experienced anything similar.

*

"MISS LORING? This is Mrs. Maughan."

"Yes, Mrs. Maughan? Is something wrong?" Domini had barely walked in the door from work when the phone had rung.

"Everyone's fine here, but unfortunately my daughter's twins have bad colds and she's at her wit's end because she's lost so much sleep. She insists she'll be all right, but I think she needs me. Dr. Wolfe is away and—"

"You want me to come and stay with the boys?" Domini anticipated the housekeeper's request, already mentally working out what she'd have to do to manage it.

"If you could! As a last resort, I can call Dr. Wolfe, but—"

"No," Domini interrupted, her heart pounding. "That's not necessary." She moistened her lips. "When is Jarod expected home?"

"Not for two weeks. There's a medical convention in L.A. He decided to combine that with a vacation—his first in years."

"I'll come tonight. It might be close to midnight, but I'll make it," Domini declared.

She hung up the phone and hugged her arms to her chest in excitement. Suddenly nothing was as important as being with the children. She left a message on Carter's answering machine, explaining that she'd been summoned away on an emergency and would call him when she could. By nine-thirty she was on her way to Seattle to get the ferry.

True to her prediction, it was twelve-thirty by the time she pulled into the driveway. Even before she'd turned off the headlights, the children dashed out of the house and converged on her.

Without waiting to be told, they lugged her cases into the house, insisting that she sleep with them in the loft. She kissed them good-night and tucked them in their bunk beds, then hurried down to the kitchen to talk to the housekeeper.

"Mrs. Maughan?" Domini found her putting her suitcase by the front door.

"My son-in-law will be over in just a little while. I've left my daughter's phone number on the pad, as well as the number where Dr. Wolfe can be reached in case of an emergency."

As the housekeeper continued to give instructions, they heard a car pull into the driveway. "That will be my son-in-law. Goodbye for now, Domini."

Domini gave Mrs. Maughan a hug and opened the door to assist the older woman. Then she gasped. The man coming up the walk was Jarod. The porch light revealed lines of fatigue around his eyes and mouth, yet he looked more attractive to her at this moment than ever before.

He slowly lowered his bags to the ground and placed his hands on his hips. "Would someone mind telling me what is going on in my own house? Or would that be too much to ask?"

"Jarod—" Domini felt com-

pelled to intervene. "Mrs. Maughan needed someone to watch out for the boys so she could go and be with her daughter."

His eyes met hers for the first time. "Considering that Pam and Dennis and the twins are vacationing in Arizona this month, she might have rather a long trip."

Shaking her head in complete confusion, Domini looked at Mrs. Maughan for an explanation.

"Dad? What are you doing home so soon?"

Jarod leaned over and scooped Michael into his arms, tousling Peter's hair at the same time. "I missed you guys too much, so I came back. I brought some presents for you. Why don't you take my bags into the living room and find them?"

Michael's cry of delight shook the house as he and Peter disappeared down the hall.

"Domini, would you mind waiting for me inside also? I'd like to talk to Mrs. Maughan in private." Jarod's shuttered expression gave nothing away.

"Yes, of course." Domini glanced at Mrs. Maughan, puzzled by the strange glint in the older woman's eyes; she seemed almost...pleased by the whole situation.

"Come and play doctor with me," Michael urged the minute she walked into the living room. He held up a toy doctor's kit Jarod had brought him.

"Am I very sick?" It was difficult to get into the spirit of Mi-

chael's game when she was desperate to know what Jarod and Mrs. Maughan were discussing.

"You're almost dead," Michael muttered seriously.

Domini arranged herself on the floor, moaned aloud several times and pressed the back of her hand to her forehead.

"Now I have to listen to your heart," Michael insisted.

"I think this is where I ought to take over."

"Daddy!" Michael scrambled to his feet and threw himself into his father's arms.

Domini's heart literally skipped a beat, and she felt as ill as she'd pretended to be moments earlier.

"Run along and I'll be up to tuck you in after I've talked to Domini."

Michael and Peter obediently said good-night to both of them and thanked their father for their presents before hurrying out of the living room.

Slowly Domini stood up and gazed at Jarod. She could see the strong

column of throat where a pulse throbbed. Her own pulse could match his, beat for beat. "Where's Mrs. Maughan?"

"In her room. I canceled the taxi she called."

"I—I see." Domini could hardly get the words out.

"I doubt it. Mrs. Maughan knew the only way you'd ever set foot inside this house was to get you here on one pretext or another. What astounds me is that you came!" His voice shook.

Domini gazed at him searchingly. "Why do you say that? I love your children. I was so thrilled to be asked to look after them, I left Seattle without even talking to Jarod."

Her declaration caused his eyes to burn a feverish blue. "Don't you think I want to believe you?" he grated.

She shook her head, in bewilderment. "What holds you back, Jarod?"

In an instant, all expression was wiped from his face. "Amanda said she loved me, but I came to realize almost from the day we got married that she was a career woman in the most literal sense of the word. No matter what plans we made, as a family, no matter what holiday or special occasion, her work came first. One day I woke up and realized I didn't love her anymore. Perhaps that's why I felt partly responsible for what went wrong between us."

So many thoughts converged in Domini's head, she was almost dizzy. All this time she'd thought Jarod couldn't love anyone else.... It made a horrible kind of sense. But Jarod was too absorbed in his explanation to notice her reaction.

"We had a fight on the day Amanda died. I threatened her with divorce if she continued to go off every day, leaving the welfare of the children to me and the latest babysitter. God may not forgive me for this, but after the funeral I felt nothing. No real sorrow. No regret," he confessed. "I just made up my mind

to be the best single parent I could be. Until a few months ago, I thought our family had healed."

His pained eyes met hers in a speaking glance. "It was love at first sight when you took the boys around the studio. The night you told me we couldn't visit you in Seattle because you'd be on tour convinced me that it was Amanda all over again—but so much worse because the children worshiped the ground you walked on."

"If only I'd known," Domini shook her head.

"You'd still have gone on tour!" he insisted, his eyes dark with defeat.

"But I would have phoned Peter before I left Seattle and made definite plans so we'd both have something to look forward to."

"Both?" he asked warily.

"I had the time of my life with your children and I would have accepted your invitation in an instant if the tour hadn't already been planned. The boys were...are of vital importance, Jarod. They always will be because I love them. I can't imagine loving a child of my own body more."

His jaw clenched. "I know. I can see I've been wrong to keep the children from you, Domini—" An incredible look of pleading entered his eyes and voice. He caught her by the shoulders and pulled her against his chest. "Don't leave me. I'm so in love with you I, can't think straight. You're the most heavenly thing to ever come into my life. You've got to marry me," he whis-

Maughan knew I was so much in love with you that I..." She saw an explosion of tiny blue lights in his eyes and then his mouth was on hers. An eternity seemed to pass as they stood twined together, one silhouette against the moonlight spilling through the window.

"Our Story Princess is going to be the bride. In white, I think," Jarod muttered sensuously, "and then maybe we'll just stay in the bedroom and make love for the rest of our lives."

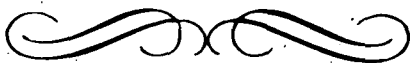
"Do you promise?" Domini gave him a seductive smile. "I want to feel our baby growing inside me. You're the man I've been searching

for all my life. Make no mistake about it, Dr. Wolfe, I love you." Her voice trembled with longing.

A low sound of contentment eased out of him. "Domini, there's so much I want to show you, tell you, share with you." He placed a tender kiss on her neck. "I've had so many dreams and plans that I never expected to materialize."

She lifted shimmering green eyes to him, clasping his dear face between her hands. "Never forget that I have magic powers. *Anything* is possible, my love."

But Jarod had magic of his own, and he cast his own spell with his lips and hands...with his love.



**Solution to
CROSSWORD #45
Vol. 8 No. 3**

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RUTH LANGAN

Ruth Langan traces her ancestry to Scotland and Ireland and feels a kinship with the characters in her historical novels. Married to her childhood sweetheart, she has raised five children and lives in Michigan. Ms. Langan received the Book Rack Award in 1994 for *The Highlander*, the *Romantic Times* Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989, and has been a finalist for many other awards, including the *Romantic Times* Career Achievement in Western Romance and Reviewer's Choice for Best Contemporary. She is the author of over fifty books and short stories, and continues to be one of the Harlequin Historicals® line's most popular authors. Her next Harlequin Historicals novel revolves around the O'Neill saga, and is available in July 1999.

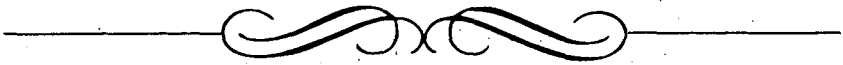


Christmas Miracle

Lizzy Spooner was a long way from the genteel Southern life she once knew. Here she was in the New Mexico Territory—fighting a blinding snowstorm, taking charge of her family and seeking refuge in the desolate mountain cabin of a handsome Yankee with a mysterious past. But only when Cody Hartin held her in his strong arms did Lizzy understand how big a miracle she really needed.



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“Doggone it, girl, stop dawdling and lean your shoulder into that wheel, or I’ll never get this wagon rolling.”

“I’m trying, Grandpop.”

Lizzy Spooner felt her muscles protest as she heaved all her weight against the lever she had rigged from a pole and a boulder. Gradually the wagon tilted enough to allow her grandfather to replace the broken wheel.

While they worked, Lizzy’s younger sister, Sara Jean, lay in the dried grass that dotted the hillside. Every few minutes she rolled from one side to the other, trying to find a comfortable position for her body, swollen with child.

A few yards away a boy of five was busy trying to capture a grasshopper.

“Maybe we ought to stop here in the shelter of these trees, Grandpop. I don’t like the color of that sky.” Lizzy shivered and wished she’d pulled a blanket around her.

“We’re not stopping.” Amos Spooner gave a last twist of the wheel. “You can let up on that lever and help your sister into the wagon.”

As Lizzy opened her mouth to protest, the old man turned away and climbed onto the wagon. She’d learned years earlier that there was no use arguing with Grandpop.

“Come on, Sara Jean.” As gently

as possible Lizzy helped her sister to her feet.

“I wish we could stay here for the night.” Sara Jean pressed her hands to her lower back.

“Maybe we’ll find a town up ahead. James,” Lizzy called to her little brother. “Time to climb aboard.”

With a creak of wagon wheels, they lurched ahead.

“Will we really be in California by Christmas?” James asked with a note of wonder.

“That’s what Grandpop said.” Lizzy fought to swallow the lump in her throat. She had spent every one of her eighteen years at the Willows, the beautiful plantation that had been in her family since Grandpop’s father had cleared the land nearly a hundred years ago. This would be their first Christmas spent away from their Georgia home.

The boy hid behind his sister’s skirts and said softly, “Last Christmas Pa was off fighting the Yankees, and all Ma did was cry. And now Ma and Pa are both in heaven.”

Lizzy thought about the crude marker they’d left on Ma’s grave alongside the trail. Not much to show for a lifetime of love. But at least Ma had found a haven from a world gone mad.

Lizzy glanced toward her sister. Sara Jean looked just like Ma. Pale

yellow hair. Soft blue eyes. Except for the discomfort, the fact that she was carrying a baby had not registered in her mind at all. The baby's father, Ben, had been one month shy of his eighteenth birthday when he married Sara Jean and went off to fight in the war. They'd only had two days and nights together before he got himself killed by a Yankee's bullet. But that was long enough to leave her with Ben's baby.

Lizzy drew the shawl tightly around herself. She knew why Grandpop had insisted on bringing them all west. After the plantation was destroyed and the land sold for back taxes, it was his way of dealing with the loss of a way of life he had always known.

Lizzy was startled out of her thoughts by the sting of something wet and cold on her cheek. She brushed a hand to it, then stared in wonder.

"Look, Lizzy," James said, "the rain is frozen."

"Snow," Grandpop muttered. He cracked the whip, urging the horses into a trot. "We've got to find a town. Soon. James, you'd best crawl into the back and warn your sister to hang on."

The boy's head disappeared inside and the old man turned his attention to his older granddaughter.

"What's that in the distance, Lizzy? A town? These old eyes can't see that far."

Lizzy gave her grandfather a gentle smile. If the truth were known, he could hardly see ten feet in front of him.

She peered through the swirling snow kicked up by the team. "It's mountains, Grandpop. We're heading toward mountains."

The old man muttered an oath under his breath before adding, "I guess it would be too much to hope that someone would be living way out here."

The wagon rattled on, up hills, down dry gulches, with the horses straining in the harness. The snow was thicker now, stinging cheeks, blinding eyes.

From the back of the wagon came the sound of Sara Jean's low moans. It was enough to cause the hairs on the back of Lizzy's neck to rise.

"Careful, Grandpop. You're heading—" Before the words were out of her mouth, the wheels tipped precariously and there was the terrible sound of splintering wood as the wagon slid down a ravine and landed on its side. In the confusion the team reared up and ripped loose the wagon tongue, dragging it through the snow until it became lodged in a pile of brush.

Lizzy had been thrown free and found herself facedown in a mound of snow. As she sat up she heard the cries of the others.

"Sara Jean. James. Grandpop." She frantically searched through the torn canvas and scattered household goods.

"I'm here." Lizzy saw James shake off a piece of canvas.

"Are you hurt?"

"No. But Sara Jean's awfully quiet."

Lizzy crawled over a shattered

rocking chair and bits and pieces of broken china to find her sister lying on a pile of clothing.

"Sara Jean. Can you move?"

The younger girl opened her eyes and sat up. "Sweet Lord almighty, I thought I'd die when we went crashing over that hill."

Lizzy scrambled up and peered through the blinding snow. Cupping her hands to her mouth, she shouted, "Grandpop. Can you hear me?"

"Over here."

Lizzy found him sitting in the snow. From the dazed look on his face she knew he'd been badly shaken.

"Can you stand, Grandpop?"

"Forget about me. Find the horses."

"I will. As soon as I see to you."

With her hand at his elbow she eased him to his feet. "Lean on me, Grandpop. I'll get you to the wagon."

With plodding steps they slogged through the snow until they reached the wagon. James and Sara Jean were already collecting the household items that littered the bank.

"You sit here, Grandpop," Lizzy said, easing him down on a pile of comforters. "I'll fetch the horses."

By the time she'd managed to free the team from the harness that had tangled around brush and boulders, her fingers were frozen. Leading the frightened animals to the overturned wagon, she surveyed the damage.

One wheel had sheared off in the fall. The side of the wagon had caved in, the wood shattered beyond

repair. But no one seemed to have sustained injuries except Grandpop. He was sitting where she'd left him, looking dazed.

"Are we going to right the wagon?" James asked as she approached.

"Can't. The wheel's broken. Maybe the axle, too. Besides, the three of us wouldn't be able to budge it."

"What about Grandpop?"

Lizzy glanced at the old man and shook her head. "Grandpop needs to save his strength."

"What are we going to do?"

Lizzy struggled to keep her fear hidden from the others. "First we're going to build a shelter. We have plenty of clothes, and Ma's old comforters to keep us warm. And there's enough of last night's stew to hold us for another day or more. I spotted a couple of big boulders that ought to offer shelter from the snow."

Working quickly, they made a crude shelter and built a fire. While Sara Jean heated the stew, Lizzy helped Grandpop to a spot near the fire.

As Sara Jean ladled their food, Grandpop turned his eyes to Lizzy and said, "No telling how long it might snow. We can't stay here, or we'll be food for the wolves. Someone has to go for help."

Lizzy swallowed. There was only one person capable of that.

"I don't know where to go, Grandpop."

"Just take one of the horses and

give him his head. If there's a barn, he'll head right to it."

"And if there isn't?" Sara Jean asked.

Lizzy's gaze was drawn to the blizzard that obscured everything beyond the firelight. What sort of dangers lay out there in the darkness? How much cold could she endure before she would give up and close her eyes? How many hours before a body froze to death?

She glanced around at the people who were depending on her to do what was needed, and managed to push aside her fears.

Sara Jean watched as Lizzy removed her petticoats.

"What are you doing?"

Lizzy forced a smile. "Haven't you heard, Sara Jean? This is what all proper ladies wear to travel through blizzards."

She pulled on a pair of Grandpop's britches and tied them up with a length of rope. Over her chemise she pulled on a homespun shirt, then sat down and laced up her high shoes.

FROM THE safety of the fire, this had seemed like merely a foolish idea. But from where Lizzy was now sitting, the whole scheme was crazy. The countryside was blanketed in white. For as far as the eye could see, there was no trace of civilization.

She felt a moment of panic. How would she ever know if the horse was making progress or merely walking in circles?

Taking a knife from her pocket, she carved a notch on the trunk of a tree, then urged the horse forward. At least she'd know if she passed this way again.

The snow had begun drifting, smoothing out the hollows and dips in the land. Had it not been for the raw cold that bit clear to her bones, Lizzy might have enjoyed the pristine beauty of the stark landscape.

The mountains, which earlier had seemed so far away, now loomed directly ahead of her. As the temperature continued to drop, trees groaned beneath the weight of the snow.

She closed her eyes against the blinding snow. It felt so good to keep her lids shut. The slow, plodding movement of the horse lulled her.

Her head jerked up at the sound of something. Something louder than the wind. She heard it again. It was the unmistakable howling of a pack of dogs.

Though the snow had drifted to the horse's belly, Lizzy dug in her heels and urged him forward. He took several tentative steps, and the howling and barking grew louder.

The horse lifted its head, nostrils flaring. Then it began rearing.

Looking up, she saw in the distance the outline of a man standing with his legs apart, moving toward her.

"Oh, thank God. Thank God," she cried.

But even as the words were escaping her frozen lips, she saw the

man lift a rifle to his shoulder and take aim.

"Don't shoot," she shouted, struggling to be heard above the howling of the wind. "I'm alone and unarmed."

She lifted her arm and waved, hoping desperately to make him understand that she meant no harm. But still he aimed the rifle.

The sound of rifle fire echoed across the hills, rolling like thunder. And then she was falling into the deep, soft snow.

The gunfire continued until, as abruptly as it started, it was over.

Lizzy waited for the pain of dying. Instead there was only a strange numbness. Then she felt strong hands lifting her, and realized it must be Ma and Pa, come to take her to the other side.

For a moment she clung to their hands and felt the heavenly warmth of them.

"I can't come with you, Pa. Not yet. There's Grandpop and Sara Jean and little James. They're depending on me."

But then she began a frantic struggle.

"Take it easy."

The voice was as rich and resonant as she'd always known it would be. And the touch as gentle. But somehow, she had never expected God to sound like a Yankee.

*

CODY STARED at the strange-looking creature in the snow. Oversize britches, a man's shirt, a hat pulled

down all the way to the forehead. But there was no mistaking the soft womanly curves beneath the clothes.

He removed the hat and was astonished by a spill of waist-length hair the color of leaves in autumn. Her face was exquisite, with a small, upturned nose, high cheekbones and a perfectly sculpted mouth.

The minute she heard his voice she seemed to relax. Her struggles ceased. It was a good thing she gave in. She was no match for his strength.

He examined her horse. It was too badly wounded to survive. What a shame to sacrifice good horseflesh. It had obviously been a farm animal, trained to the plow. Another blast of gunfire echoed through the hills as he ended the horse's suffering.

Minutes later, cradling the girl against his chest, he pulled himself into the saddle and urged his horse up a steep ravine. Within a short time they had taken refuge from the storm in a snug log structure.

Unrolling some fur hides from behind his saddle, Cody wrapped the girl in one, then bent to the task of getting a fire started.

LIZZY'S TEETH chattered uncontrollably. Nearby a fire crackled. She wanted to crawl closer, to feel the heat of the flames against her flesh. But something was restraining her.

Hands. Strong hands.

She inhaled the fumes of something potent an instant before a bottle was pressed to her lips and she was forced to drink liquid fire.

Choking, she mustered her strength and pushed the hands aside.

"Now you're looking better."

That voice again. She opened her eyes, expecting to see her first glimpse of eternity. Instead there was only a man. He was tall, with broad shoulders and muscled arms straining the rolled sleeves of a faded shirt. The britches he wore were made of fur, as were the coverings on his feet. He stood over her with his feet planted far apart. As if ready to do battle, Lizzy thought. One hand rested on a pistol in a holster slung low on his hips. In the other hand he cradled a bottle of whiskey. The upper half of his face was shaded by a wide-brimmed hat. The lower half was clearly visible. A heavy dark beard covered his cheeks and chin.

The dog, at his feet was staring into the raging storm, his lips drawn back to bare his fangs.

For a brief moment she was overcome with disappointment. "But you're not God."

His frown was replaced by a charming grin. "I've been called a lot of things, ma'am, but I've never been mistaken for the Almighty."

Then she suddenly recoiled. "You're the man who shot me."

Beneath the heavy fur robe she began to feel for the bullet wound. But miraculously, there was no wound, no pain.

"I wasn't shooting at you. It was the wolves that were snapping at your heels."

"Wolves?" She felt faint. "You mean that barking and howling?"

"So that's what made them so bold. You must have been half out of your mind from the cold not to fight or evade them. They were closing in for the kill. They'd already crippled your horse."

"My horse?"

"I'm sorry. I had to put him down. He was too badly wounded."

Lizzy swallowed. Now they would be left with only one horse to pull the wagon. Grandpop would be furious.

"How many wolves were there?"

He shrugged. "Maybe eight or ten. I managed to get most of them; but a couple are still out there. That's why old Beau is snarling."

An involuntary shiver passed through her. She glanced around. "Where are we?"

"A lean-to I have up in the hills. Comes in handy if I find myself far away from home. You needed a fire fast or you weren't going to make it."

She felt the painful tingling in her hands and feet, a signal that she was slowly returning to normal. "Where do you live?"

"Up the mountain." He pulled a stick from the fire and offered it to her. On the end of it was a sizzling piece of meat.

As she ate she slowly felt restored. He handed her a cup of steaming coffee laced generously with whiskey.

"Now why don't you tell me what brought you out in this storm. I'm guessing, from what you were trying to say, that there are others."

She nodded. "My grandfather, my sister and my little brother."

"Any of them hurt?"

"I don't think so. Just shaken up. Our wagon tipped over and lost a wheel. We made a shelter and got a fire going. There was plenty of food and warm blankets. But now I'm worried about the wolves."

"As long as there's a fire, they'll keep their distance. Besides, as soon as we left, I'm certain they feasted on horseflesh. Does your grandfather have a rifle?"

She nodded.

"Good." He wrapped himself in a fur robe and lay down beside her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to sleep."

"Aren't we going after my family?"

"We're not going anywhere until this storm passes. Now get some rest. You're going to need it."

Lizzy watched as he drew his hat down over his face. Minutes later she could hear the slow, steady breathing that indicated he was sound asleep.

She felt an overwhelming gratitude that this stranger had rescued her. Leaning over him, she studied the fierce, bearded face. Up close she could see long spiky lashes, casting shadows across the hollows of his cheeks. The hair on his chin, like the hair on his head, was thick and dark and curly. His lips, nestled in all that hair, were perfectly formed, with the lower lip full. His lips were slightly parted, and while she watched, she thought they

curved into the merest hint of a smile.

Alarmed, she started to draw back. Instantly a hand with a grip like iron closed around her wrist, holding her still.

"Just what was it you were looking for?" His voice, low and sleep roughened, frightened her.

"I..." She couldn't let him see her fear. Lifting her chin, she said, "I have a right to see the man who intends to sleep beside me."

"Do you now?" He chuckled, low and deep in his throat, and drew her fractionally closer. "And do you like what you see?"

She tried to draw back but his grasp was too firm. He held her by the wrist, forcing her to press her hands on his chest. A most uncomfortable position, because she could feel the steady, even hammering of his heart.

"What I see is a man who looks like a hairy beast."

Her eyes widened as he drew her even closer, until her lips were hovering mere inches above his.

As she began to push frantically, she realized her mistake. The more she fought, the firmer his grasp became. If he dared to kiss her, what would she do? She had never been kissed by a man. The very thought terrified her.

His hand cupped the back of her head, guiding it down until her mouth brushed his. Her lips trembled, and he could feel the tiny tremors that raced through her.

Instantly he felt the jolt and

cursed himself for being so fool-hardy.

The girl pushed against him, breaking contact. He watched her eyes, seeing the cloud of confusion as she struggled to scramble away.

"Now, if you have no more curiosity about me, ma'am..." He was surprised at how difficult it was to speak. His throat felt constricted. "You'd better roll yourself into that fur and grab some sleep."

CODY POURED a cup of coffee from a blackened pot and watched the sleeping girl over the rim of his cup. He wondered now if the kiss they'd shared had been only a dream.

She was either a fool or a hero, going out in that blizzard to search for help. She'd sounded kind of odd, calling him God. A grin split his lips. By now she was probably calling him the devil.

He frowned, thinking about the herd of wild mustangs he'd spotted in a canyon not far from here. They'd be trapped by the blizzard, making it easy to catch them. He'd intended to start after them at daybreak. Now he'd have to alter his plans. But only for a day. He'd find the girl's family, help them repair the wagon and send them on their way.

LIZZY AWOKE to the aroma of coffee and the sizzle of meat over a fire. It took her only a moment to remember where she was. In a lean-to, somewhere in the hills with a stranger who had a resonant voice

and the look of a wild mountain man.

He had kissed her. Boldly, with no thought of her feelings. Just thinking about it brought the heat to her cheeks.

Pushing aside the heavy pelts, she sat up.

The man kneeling beside the fire glanced over at her. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." She crawled from the nest of fur and spotted her shoes near the fire. "I don't think I thanked you properly last night. You saved my life. For that, I'm most grateful." She walked closer. "My name is Lizz—Elizabeth Spooner."

"Cody Martin."

He extended his hand and noticed the way she hung back at first before placing her hand in his. He glanced down and immediately understood why. Her palms were so badly callused that they were cracked and bleeding.

Cody handed her a cup of coffee and broke off a piece of meat. "Better fortify yourself with as much food as you can manage. We won't be stopping again once we leave this place."

Lizzy swallowed the strong, hot coffee. The thought of what had nearly happened last night left her weak.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to find my family now."

"So you made it," Grandpop said when their horse drew near. For a moment his voice roughened and he

cleared his throat. "Girl, when I saw how bad this storm was last night, I figured you for a goner."

"I would have been if it weren't for Mr. Martin." Lizzy slid from the saddle and hugged her sister and brother. "He found me in the hills."

"We're much obliged." Grandpop eyed the man with mistrust. "I'm Amos Spooner, and these are my other grandchildren, Sara Jean and James."

"Cody Martin." He extended his hand in greeting.

The stranger's voice was low and deep. A brusque Northern voice. And not at all friendly.

"Your granddaughter said you have a broken wagon wheel and possibly a broken axle. Where's the rest of the wagon train?"

"We're traveling alone." At Cody's surprised look Amos shrugged and cleared his throat again. "Just packed up what little we had and left. Didn't take time to plan."

Cody's mouth formed a grim, tight line. "The West is littered with the bodies of men who didn't take time to plan."

Lizzy and her sister stood aside. Ignoring the snow, Cody crawled around the wreckage. When he was finished his frown had deepened into a scowl. "Looks like your wagon suffered some serious damage, Mr. Spooner. I think it'll take a couple of days to make repairs." So much for his plans to find those mustangs today.

"Repairs? Except for a hammer, I don't have any tools."

Cody stared at the old man. "No tools? How far have you come?"

"We're from Georgia." Lizzy spoke the words proudly.

"I guess you have no choice, then." Cody spoke without emotion. "I have a place in the mountains. We'll have to drag your belongings up there until the wagon can be repaired."

"How long?" Amos eyed him suspiciously.

Cody shrugged. "A couple of days. A week maybe."

Amos swallowed. A week under the same roof as a Yankee. "Guess it can't be helped. All right, Lizzy, Sara Jean. Let's start bundling everything."

CODY DIDN'T like the color of the sky. There was more snow coming. He didn't know how much longer the two on foot could keep up this pace. But he had to keep pushing if they were going to reach safety before the next storm hit.

"How much farther?" Amos called.

"Just up ahead there." Cody pointed and they all strained to see through the curtain of snow that had begun falling.

In the distance, nestled between two mountain peaks, was a flat meadow frosted with snow. In the gathering dusk, the outline of two buildings could barely be distinguished from the trees that formed a protective half circle on either side of them.

It was almost like a fortress,

Lizzy thought as they drew nearer. The mountains behind formed an impenetrable barrier. The trees on either side stood like sentinels. The only approach was along a sheer ascent leading to the meadow, which could easily be viewed from the front door.

Cody led them to a small log house with a wide porch across the front. He untied the latch and shoved open the door before heading toward the barn.

Sara Jean helped Grandpop inside, with James trailing them. Sara Jean quickly settled herself into the rocker and tucked the fur robe over her lap. Grandpop and James flung themselves down on the floor, too weary to move.

Lizzy was the last to enter. She stared around the single room, noting the rocker pulled up in front of the fireplace and the table and chairs made of rough timber. A bench stood just inside the door, and beside it a pair of unfinished boots. There was a loft built just below the log rafters, and though she couldn't see what was up there, she knew that was where Cody slept.

The house reflected the man. Solid, sturdy, neat.

"How did this man happen to come upon you, Lizzy?" Grandpop asked sternly.

"I was lost, and a pack of wolves were attacking me." Lizzy closed the door but kept her voice low, in case Cody should come in behind her. "And suddenly he was there, with his horse and dog and rifle. It was like a miracle."

"What's a miracle, Lizzy?"

James asked.

"Pa always said it was the hand of God touching us."

"How do we know when God touches us?"

"When there's just no other explanation for what's happened," Lizzy said. "Ma used to say, if we saw the Christmas star and wished for something purely unselfish, we'd see a miracle."

"Have you ever seen a miracle, Grandpop?"

"No," the old man said abruptly. "And I don't suppose I ever will."

"Then how do you explain what happened out there?" Lizzy demanded.

"You just got lucky, girl. That's all."

SOON THE ROOM was full of light and heat. Cody placed a blackened pot over the fire, and their mouths watered as the aroma of coffee filled the air.

"I keep my food down here in the root cellar." He seemed to be speaking to no one in particular. "Care to give me a hand?"

Lizzy was the only one with the strength to follow. Her eyes widened at the shelves loaded with potatoes, carrots, apples, dried meats. "I don't believe our cellars at the Willows were better stocked than this."

"The Willows?"

Lizzy felt her cheeks grow hot when he turned to study her.

She stared at the hard-packed dirt floor. "Our home in Georgia."

It wasn't what she said, but what she didn't, that told him all he needed to know. The entire country was aware of the torching of Atlanta and the plundering of the plantations surrounding it. He didn't press the issue.

In grim silence, Cody lifted the lantern from a peg and turned toward the stairs. Lizzy followed.

Grandpop was asleep on the bench by the door. Sara Jean was still settled in the rocker. Her breathing was slow and easy. James had curled up on a rug in front of the fire beside Cody's dog. The little boy gamely lifted his head and smiled at Lizzy. Then he couldn't fight sleep. His eyes slowly closed. He snuggled himself into the dog's soft fur.

Lizzy understood their weariness. While she cut up vegetables and meat and placed them in a pot over the fire, she brushed damp tendrils from her forehead. How good it was to have escaped the frigid air. Here in Cody's cabin it was snug and warm.

"Did you grow cotton in Georgia?" Cody picked up a rifle and began to oil and clean it.

"Some. That was Grandpop's love. The soil." Lizzy glanced lovingly at her grandfather. "But Pa didn't share Grandpop's love for the soil. He wanted to breed horses."

Cody's interest was instantly piqued.

"What kind of horses did he breed?"

"Thoroughbreds. Some of the finest racehorses in the South," Lizzy said with pride. The light in her eyes suddenly faded. "But the war ended Pa's dream. The army needed all the horseflesh we could provide. General Lee himself signed the orders. Though it broke Pa's heart, he couldn't possibly refuse. He said it was his duty as a Southern gentleman."

She tossed a handful of carrots into the pot of water and wiped her hands on her britches.

Cody watched as she stirred the pot, then rolled out a batch of biscuits and placed them over some hot coals. Lifting a hand, she brushed the damp hair from her face and leaned back on her heels, staring into the flames. In the firelight her eyes gleamed amber. Her skin was as smooth and pale as alabaster.

Unable to battle the overpowering weariness, her lids flickered, then closed. Her head nodded.

She felt herself being lifted in strong arms and carried to the softest bed she'd ever known. She was enveloped in something incredibly comfortable and warm. And for one brief moment she felt the scratch of a rough hand across her cheek. Then sleep claimed her.

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THE FRAGRANCE of freshly baked biscuits filled the air.

Lizzy glanced from Cody, standing in the doorway, to her family, seated around the crude table. The

biscuit in her grandfather's hand was perfectly baked, with no trace of having been burned.

"Oh, Lizzy, we woke you," Sara Jean said. "Cody told us to go ahead and eat and let you sleep."

Lizzy shoved the hair from her eyes and got to her feet, uncomfortably aware that the man in the doorway was studying her.

"Sorry. I guess the heat of the fire did me in. I didn't mean to fall asleep before my chores were done."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Cody muttered, standing his rifle alongside the door. "You walked nearly ten miles today. And in those drifts it probably felt like a hundred." He glanced toward Amos. "I examined your wagon more carefully. I don't think that axle can be repaired. It's broken in several places. But I have a log we can hew that's just about the right length to replace it. It'll hold you until you find a blacksmith."

"More delays," the old man said with a trace of irritability. "How long do you reckon it will take us to get under way?"

"Depends." Cody watched as the old man filled his pipe. "A little longer than I first thought. A week. Maybe more. I can lend a hand. But not until I chase up a herd of mustangs first. I can't afford to let them get away."

"Wild mustangs?" James's eyes widened with interest.

Cody nodded.

"Are you bringing them here?"

"If I catch up with them."

"Why?"

"That's how I earn my living. I break mustangs to the saddle and sell them to the army."

A sudden awkward stillness settled over the occupants of the room.

It was James who said, "Yankee soldiers come here?"

"The last time I looked, the war was over." Cody spoke quietly, deliberately. "There's just the United States Army now, son. Think you can remember that?"

"Yes, sir." James knew he'd been gently chastised. Something in the way Cody had spoken stirred his memories of Pa.

Needing to be busy, Lizzy picked up a small linen square and admired the handiwork. Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble stitching rosebuds along the edge. It seemed so out of place in this rough cabin.

Sara Jean sank into the rocking chair and closed her eyes.

Minutes later they all looked up at the sound of horses, approaching hard and fast.

"Snuff out that lantern," Cody called sharply as he picked up the rifle and opened the door a crack to peer out into the darkness.

Lizzy did as she was told, then hurried across the room to steady Grandpop, who had lifted his rifle to his shoulder.

"James," she whispered, "take Sara Jean and hide under those pelts."

It occurred to Cody that these people knew a whole lot about dealing with unexpected company. He himself knew firsthand about the

bands of former soldiers from both sides who roamed the battered country brutalizing innocents.

His finger tightened on the trigger of the rifle.

"Who's there?"

"We're looking for horses. Heard you had some."

"Who said?"

"Fellow in town said you had mustangs."

Realizing the fireplace illuminated the room and its occupants, Cody stepped outside. Like a shadow, Beau slipped out to stand beside him.

Cody counted six men on horseback. In the darkness all he could see were the silhouettes of wide-brimmed hats, long leather dusters and six rifles, all trained on him.

"You aiming to buy?" His voice lowered. "Or steal?"

"We got money," came a voice in the darkness. "But we need fresh horses right away."

"Sorry. Can't oblige you. But if you come back tomorrow night, I'll have all you want."

A savage curse broke the stillness. "We need 'em now."

Men on the run. Cody had seen enough of them to recognize the desperation in the tone. "Sorry. Like I said—"

"Maybe we didn't make ourselves plain enough," came the angry voice. "We can't wait. We'll take any horses you got in that barn."

With Beau at his heels Cody stepped off the porch and walked toward the horsemen, keeping his rifle

aimed at the one who was doing the talking.

In a shaft of moonlight they could see his eyes, narrowed in concentration. His voice was calm. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that."

At the sound of his voice, one head came up sharply.

"Cody? My God, is that you?"

At the boy's strangled tones, Cody strained to see through the darkness.

"My name's Cody Martin. Who are you?"

"It's me. Ned."

At his words Cody stiffened, and for a moment he nearly forgot the danger as he let the rifle drop to his side.

One horse separated itself from the others. A boy, as tall and slender as a sapling, slid from the saddle and started forward. Beau growled, but

at a word from Cody sniffed the stranger and let him pass.

Cody's words stopped the youth in midstride. "Have you traveled far with this bunch, Ned?"

"No, I..." The boy swallowed and tried again. "They found me in a blizzard last night, carrying my saddle. I had to shoot my horse when he went lame. They said if I could handle a gun they'd let me tag along."

"Looks like you hitched yourself to a real winner, Ned. If you ask me, they're not about to ride out of here until they've helped themselves to everything that's mine."

"That's not so. Tell him, Whit. Tell him you just want to buy some fresh mounts."

Cody saw the gleam of white teeth as the leader smiled. "Sorry, kid. It didn't take this stranger long to figure us out. Now step back. 'Cause if you stay in the line of fire, we're going to have to believe you've taken sides with him against us."

"You can't shoot him."

The man laughed. "Did you really believe we were going to pay him for his horses?"

"But you said..."

"This is your last chance, boy," the leader called.

"You don't understand." Ned's voice was a high-pitched note of pleading. "This man isn't just another stranger. The last time I saw him was two years ago and thousands of miles from here. Cody Martin is my brother."

LIZZY'S MOUTH dropped open in surprise. In the moonlight she studied the two profiles. Both men had broad foreheads, finely sculpted, aristocratic noses. But where Cody's face was covered with dark hair, Ned's was clean-shaven.

The leader swore again, loudly, savagely. "You're a fool, boy. Now we're going to have to kill the both of you. And two men against five don't stand a chance."

Lizzy never stopped to calculate the odds. Cody had saved her life. She owed him as much. Besides, it was what Pa would have done.

Stepping outside quickly, she took up a position on the other side of Cody and aimed her rifle at the

horsemen. Wearing ragged britches and a faded shirt, with her hair hidden beneath Grandpop's hat, she looked like just another shabby traveler.

"Now it's three against five," she said in her soft Southern drawl.

There was a long hush as the others waited for their leader's command. At last he lowered his rifle. "You win. This time. But the horse Ned was riding is ours."

At a gesture from Cody, Ned unsaddled his horse and handed the reins to the leader.

The man called Whit had a voice as cold and cutting as the night air. "You'd better look over your shoulder the next time you ride these hills, mister. And you, too, boy. We don't take kindly to those who cross us."

"And I don't take kindly to those who'd steal from me," Cody called. "Now get off my land. Before I lose my patience. And my temper."

The three continued to stand side by side on the porch, rifles aimed, until the six horses blended into the darkness.

Slowly Lizzy let go of the breath she'd been holding. She turned toward Cody and Ned, expecting to witness a warm reunion. Instead, Cody lowered his rifle and turned on her in a rage.

"Don't you ever put yourself in harm's way like that again. That damned fool act could have gotten you killed."

Stung by his attack, she reacted with similar anger. Her words were-

spoken in a low, throaty whisper.
"It worked, didn't it?"

His eyes blazed. "And what if they'd called your bluff and opened fire?"

"It wasn't a bluff. I know how to shoot a rifle."

He caught her roughly by the arm and dragged her close. His breath stung her temple as he warned, "Don't ever do a thing like that again. The last thing I want is for you to get yourself killed for me."

She pushed away from him. "Don't you worry your head about that, Cody Martin. I have no intention of dying for the likes of you."

Enraged, he turned his full wrath on his brother. His tone was as cold as steel. "You'd better come inside and warm yourself before you go."

Go? Lizzy was mystified. Hadn't the lad claimed to be Cody's brother, separated for the past two years?

"Only for a few minutes," Ned said calmly, after a moment's hesitation. His tone was equally frosty. "If you have a horse I can buy, I'll be on my way."

"I'm fresh out of horses." Cody held the door and waited until Lizzy entered the cabin. "But I expect to have a fresh herd tomorrow."

"Tomorrow." Ned followed Cody inside. "I'd planned on being in the town of Commencement by morning."

"You'll have a long walk." Cody secured the door and stood his rifle alongside it.

"How far is it from here?"

"About thirty miles. Even on a fresh mount it's a hard day's ride."

"What's Commencement?" Sara Jean asked.

Ned glanced toward the soft Southern voice and his eyes widened at the sight of a pretty face surrounded by a veil of pale blond hair.

"Evening, ma'am." He whipped his hat from his head and blushed clear to his toes.

"Ned, this is Sara Jean Spooner."

Sara Jean dimpled.

"She and her family got caught in the blizzard and damaged their wagon. This is her grandfather, Amos, and her little brother, James. And this is her older sister, Elizabeth."

Peals of laughter issued from James's throat.

"What's so funny?" Lizzy asked.

"Cody called you Elizabeth."

Lizzy wished the floor would open up and swallow her. If Cody noticed her humiliation, he said nothing.

"You still haven't told me what Commencement is." Sara Jean was determined to draw Ned's attention to her.

"It's the only town in these parts," Cody explained.

Ned avoided his brother's eyes. "I'm supposed to meet a man there who has a job for me, ma'am."

"Maybe we could settle there, Grandpop," Sara Jean said excitedly.

"It's not much of a place yet. A few dozen families or so." Cody lifted a bottle of whiskey from a shelf and poured three glasses. He

offered one to Ned and one to Amos before lifting the last to his lips. "What kind of work are you being offered?"

Ned studied the toe of his worn boot. "They need someone to ride shotgun on the stage."

Cody's eyes narrowed, but he kept the anger from his tone. "That's a long way from your original calling."

"And this is a long way from yours." Ned drained his glass and set it down hard on the table. "Would I be imposing if I asked to sleep in your barn tonight?"

"Might as well stay in here where it's warm." Cody glanced toward the loft. "I guess there's room for the two ladies up there. The rest of us can sleep on the floor around the fireplace."

As LIZZY and Sara Jean rolled themselves into the comfort of fur, they could hear the men's voices.

Amos cleared his throat. "Did I hear you say you were Cody's brother?"

"Yes, sir." Ned removed his wide-brimmed hat and duster and carefully hung them on a peg by the door.

"You two don't seem to hit it off too well." Amos watched as the young man carefully washed his hands and face, then began removing his boots.

"I haven't seen Cody, nor spoken to him, since the winter of '64."

That date struck a nerve with Lizzy. That was the year her father

had gone off to war. It was the last time she'd seen Pa alive.

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LIZZY LAY snuggled in the warm fur and listened to the stillness of the early morning. A horse whinnied in the barn. The wind whistled through the bare branches of the trees. High above, a bird cried. Below, Grandpop snored softly.

Moving stealthily past the sleeping figures on the floor, she pulled on her shoes and, wrapping a shawl around her shoulders, picked up a pitcher and basin and headed toward the privacy of the barn.

CODY HAD come out in the early morning to see to the horses. When the door to the barn suddenly opened, he lifted his head and reached automatically for his rifle.

From his position in the stall, he could see Lizzy's slender figure move forward in a swirl of snowflakes. Then the barn door was latched shut and he watched as she breathed deeply. A smile touched her lips and she sighed as she walked toward the remains of her family's wagon and began rummaging through her belongings.

From the light in her eyes it was obvious that she liked his barn, and for some reason that made him happy.

By the time Cody realized what she was up to, it was too late to let her know that he was there. As she began stripping her clothing away,

he knew that he would have to remain silent. To reveal his presence would be to invite her wrath.

She was so perfect, she took his breath away. He felt a rush of heat as his gaze moved from the slope of her shoulders to her tiny waist. He drank in a glimpse of her breasts as she washed herself.

Soon she lifted a delicate ivory chemise over her head, then began to lace the ribbons that held it across her breasts. He felt another rush of heat as her fingers tied the ribbons, and he thought of his own rough fingers brushing her silken flesh. The mere thought set him on fire.

She turned her back on him and picked up the dress that lay in the hay. She slipped on the dress and smoothed it down over her waist. Then, pulling a brush and comb from her pocket, she sat in the hay and tossed her head, sending her waist-length hair spilling forward over one breast.

Cody had an almost overpowering desire to take the brush from her hands and smooth the silken strands himself.

Beside him the mare stomped and snorted, causing Lizzy to glance toward the stall. For a moment she merely stared at the shadowy figure. Then, as realization dawned, she scrambled to her feet and stood facing the man who had dared to violate her privacy.

"How dare you?" She advanced on him, her eyes flashing fire, her hands tightened into fists at her sides. "You are nothing more than a vile, low-born..."

She lifted her fists and began pounding his chest. "Grandpop warned me that Yankees were no better than dogs. You stood there, watching me undress, watching me bathe myself, and you have no remorse, no shame."

She struck him again and again, and he did nothing to block the blows. "You are mean. Cruel. Horrible."

Tears sprang to her eyes and she felt ashamed that he should see her crying. But as she tried to turn away, he caught her by the wrists and held her.

"Don't cry, Lizzy."

"I am not crying." But at the denial, her tears flowed even harder and she felt them stream, hot and wet, along her cheeks.

Cody knew there was no explanation he could offer that would be acceptable to her in her present mood.

She tried to yank her hands free but he continued to hold her firmly by the wrists.

"You're laughing at me," she cried. "Oh, how can you be so cruel?"

"I'd never laugh at you." His tone hardened. "I'm sorry that I startled you. But I'm not sorry for what I saw."

He drew her closer and plunged one hand into the tangle of hair at her temple. Soft. Her hair was as soft as a snowdrift. He twisted a strand around his finger and drew her face close.

Suddenly she was afraid. But not of him. She was afraid of the way

her heart had begun tripping over itself. Her throat went dry as he lowered his head to her. She ran a tongue over her lips, and he watched the movement.

His hand stayed in her hair, but his fingers gently massaged her scalp as he drew her fractionally closer.

She stiffened. "You must not do this...."

Her protest was swallowed by the brush of his lips over hers.

He lifted his head, and his dark eyes stared down into hers.

He drew her close, then framed her face with his big, work-worn hands.

Lizzy closed her eyes, ashamed that, for all her outrage, she yearned for the feel of his lips on hers again.

"Open your eyes." His tone was low, almost gruff.

Lizzy's lids snapped open.

He stared into pale amber eyes and saw himself reflected there. And then whatever last thread of sanity he'd managed to salvage was lost.

He crushed her mouth with his. His arms came around her, drawing her into the warm circle of his embrace.

Heat. It was so intense, he'd never known anything like it. His blood heated until it flowed like liquid fire through his veins.

She tasted clean and fresh and new. The fragrance of bayberry soap clung to her hair and skin.

He felt the trembling of her lips beneath his and knew that she'd never before been kissed like this. But though the urge to leave her un-

sullied was great, the need to taste her was greater.

Lizzy felt splinters of ice snaking through her veins. Then a moment later the ice became sparks, heating her blood.

She had never dreamed a man's lips could bring such pleasure, a man's hands could unlock such feelings.

Cody took the kiss deeper and felt a shudder pass through her. He knew he was taking her too far, too fast. But he needed one more taste, one more touch.

He'd known passion before. And desire. But never before had he known such hunger. A hunger so deep, so great, he was certain nothing would ever fill this void.

He knew he had to end this before he took them over the edge.

Struggling to the surface, he called upon every ounce of willpower, and finally lifted his head.

His voice, when he finally managed it, was rougher than he'd intended. "Go back to the house. Now. This minute."

Her eyes were wide. Her lips were still swollen from his kisses.

Without a word she crossed the barn and picked up the basin, tossing the water into a trough. Wrapping her shawl around her, she grabbed up her brush and comb and hurried away.

THE DOOR to the cabin opened with a swirl of snowflakes. Lizzy kept her attention rigidly focused on the food she was preparing for breakfast. But

she knew the exact moment when Cody removed his jacket and turned toward her. She felt her cheeks flame and blamed it on the heat of the fire.

"How far is that herd of mustangs?" Ned asked as Cody took a seat at the table.

"Couple of hours, if they haven't moved on."

"If you don't mind, I'd like to go with you."

As Lizzy served their plates, she saw Cody's head come up sharply.

"What would you ride?"

Ned shrugged. "I saw a mare in the stall out in the barn."

Cody quickly shook his head. "The mare's getting ready to foal. The only horse left is the Spooners' plow horse."

Ned glanced at Amos. "Would you mind?"

"He's slow," the old man said, "but dependable."

Ned glanced at his brother. "Can I go with you?"

"Suit yourself." Though his words were curt, Lizzy thought she detected a hint of pleasure in his tone. *

As Ned and Cody began to eat, they noticed that the Spooner family had gone very still. Glancing up, they paused, then set down their forks and bowed their heads as the others were doing.

"For this food we thank Thee," Amos intoned.

"Amen," the others said in unison.

Cody glanced across the table at Ned, who had gone very still. Sud-

denly Ned wolfed down his food and bolted from the table. "I'll get my saddle and bring the horse around."

When he was gone Amos said conversationally, "Is the mare wild?"

"She's skittish. I found her with a herd of mustangs up in the hills. But from her lines and coloring, I'd say she has more Thoroughbred in her than mustang." For the first time that Lizzy could remember, Cody allowed his emotions to show in his voice. "She's the most perfect mare I've ever seen. She mated with my stallion. If her foal is as perfect as she is, I'll have a whole new line of breeding stock."

"Can I see her?" James asked.

"You can look, son. But don't go near her. Like I said, she's skittish."

James nodded solemnly.

As they finished eating, Ned hurried in, shaking snow from his hat and duster. "Looks like another storm coming in."

"That's nothing new in these parts." Cody slipped on his coat and pulled his hat low on his head. Turning to Amos, he said, "We should be back before dark. But if we're not, don't worry. I have several shelters in the hills."

He saw the way Lizzy lifted her chin and faced him with a scowl. Softening his tone, he added, "If you have to, take shelter in the cellar under the cabin."

Amos nodded. "I'm much obliged."

For a moment Cody looked beyond the old man to where Lizzy

stood, and their gazes met and held. She felt the heat stain her cheeks as he touched a hand to the brim of his hat.

Lizzy plunged the dishes into a basin of hot water and took comfort in the hours of hard work that lay ahead.

THROWING OPEN the barn door, Amos and Lizzy peered through the swirling snowflakes and watched as Cody and Ned drove a herd of horses into the corral.

The horses milled around in confusion, many of them bucking in their eagerness to escape. But as the men tossed feed over the rails, the horses settled down and began to eat.

"Come on, girl. We've wasted enough time." Amos led the way back to the log he was hewing, and while he began to plane it, Lizzy held it securely.

Cody and Ned led their horses into the barn. When they entered its warmth, they shook the snow from their wide-brimmed hats. The horses eagerly trotted to a trough. Beau dropped down into the hay and lay panting. Exhausted, Ned dropped down beside the dog and closed his eyes.

"I see you found your herd," Amos said without looking up.

"The storm had them trapped in a box canyon." Cody walked closer to watch as the old man worked over the log. When he caught sight of Lizzy's hands, his smile turned into a frown.

Embarrassed, Lizzy looked away, refusing to meet his eyes.

Cody kept his tone casual. "Why don't I plane for a while, Amos, and you can hold the log."

The old man looked up with pleasure. "You aren't too tired from the trail?"

OVER SUPPER Ned regaled the family with tales of the day spent with his brother. He was clearly still excited about their adventure. And though he tried to be polite to everyone, it was obvious that he directed most of his conversation toward Sara Jean.

The young woman was equally enthralled.

Cody watched as Lizzy began to clear the table. He saw her wince as she lifted the plates. Instantly he was on his feet, taking the dishes from her hands.

"I'll take care of these."

"No." She stubbornly clung to them. "I heard what Ned said. From the sounds of it, you did more than most men today."

"Ned likes to exaggerate."

She shook her head. "You've done enough, Cody. We invaded your home; ate your food and stole your privacy."

"And now you're going to take orders from me." With a smile, he firmly took the dishes from her hands and placed them in the basin of hot water. "I'll wash, you dry."

As Lizzy picked up a square of linen, she said, "I've been admiring

the handiwork on these towels. Where did you get them?"

The minute the words were out of her mouth, she saw the way his smile faded. Whatever fragile camaraderie had begun to develop between them was suddenly shattered.

She tried to start a conversation, but it was plain that Cody's mind was elsewhere.

As they finished the dishes in silence, James called, "Lizzy, will you come and hear my prayers now?"

Lizzy was torn between trying to smooth things over with Cody and her obligation to her little brother. Turning away, she knelt beside James, who was already wrapped in a fur throw. From the corner of her eye she saw Cody pull on his coat. The door closed behind him. A short time later, when she kissed James and tucked him in, she realized that the others had all retired for the night.

She should be tired, too. Her muscles ached from the day's work. But instead of feeling weary, she experienced a strange restlessness.

Out on the porch, Cody rolled a cigarette and held a match to the tip. He drew smoke into his lungs, then lifted his head to study the path of a falling star.

Lizzy watched it, too, and squeezed her eyes tightly shut while she made a wish. When she turned, Cody was just entering the cabin.

He hung up his jacket and crossed directly to her. In a gruff whisper he said, "Hold out your hands."

"What? I don't..."

"Woman, why do you always argue with me?" He lifted one hand for his inspection and began applying a salve.

Within minutes the burning pain began to fade. She stared down at her hands, then up at him.

His eyes narrowed as he caught her hands in his. "Have I made it worse?"

She shook her head. "No. They're beginning to feel better already."

"Good." He continued holding her hands. "Tomorrow Ned and I will get busy on that log. You shouldn't be doing work like that."

"I don't mind."

"But I do. I've watched you work like a mule." His voice lowered intimately. "You deserve better, Elizabeth."

She felt her cheeks grow hot. Though it was painful, it was time for honesty.

"My name isn't really Elizabeth. I mean, I was christened by that name. But I've always been called Lizzy. I guess I was just pretending something that wasn't really me." She swallowed. "I didn't want you to think you'd wasted your time rescuing someone who wasn't worthy of the effort. For a little while I just didn't want to be plain old Lizzy Spooner."

His voice warmed. "Believe me, you could never be plain." He lifted her hands to his lips and pressed a kiss to her knuckles, then turned them over and opened them, pressing a kiss to each palm. For a moment Lizzy felt tears spring to her

eyes as he drew her arms around his waist and gathered her close.

Against her temple he murmured lazily, "And I will never regret rescuing you, Lizzy Spooner."

The touch of his lips against her temple sent threads of pleasure skittering along her spine.

If his words were lazy, his mouth wasn't. He moved it across her eyebrow, along the curve of her cheek to the corner of her lips. And though she longed for his mouth on hers, he changed direction and explored her ear, her jaw, her neck, until she moaned and arched her head for his further inspection. He ran hot, moist kisses along her throat until she gasped and clutched at him.

His mouth covered hers with hungry kisses. His hands pressed against her back, drawing her firmly against him.

Her hands clutched at the front of his shirt, then curled around his neck as she returned his kisses.

Suddenly, all he knew was Lizzy. All he could feel was her warm, moist skin beneath his fingers. All he could taste was the honeyed sweetness of her lips.

Never before had Lizzy known such needs. Needs sharper than any hunger. Stronger than anything she'd ever experienced.

Cody's lips moved over hers, slowly, seductively, causing her to sigh and move in his arms.

"Lizzy." Carefully, Cody pushed her a little away.

Her eyes were heavy lidded, her lips swollen. Just looking at her brought another swift rush of desire.

What had he been thinking of? With her family sleeping just a few feet away.

"I have to go out to the corral now."

"The corral?" Her head was still spinning. Nothing seemed to be making any sense.

"To check on the mustangs."

"Yes. Of course." She ran a tongue over her lips and prayed her legs would hold her.

He paused in the doorway. His voice was little more than a whisper. The tone was flat. But his words had more impact than if they'd been shouted.

"The towels were made by my wife, Mary. She died two years ago."

The door closed behind him.

Her eyes brimming, Lizzy continued to stand and stare. She knew that sleep would elude her this night.

*

LIZZY AWOKES with a start and realized that Sara Jean was already downstairs. She could hear her sister's laughter, and the deeper sound of Ned's voice joining in.

With everyone awake, Lizzy knew there wouldn't be time for a private moment to wash and brush her hair. Slipping into her dress and shoes, she climbed down the ladder and hurried to prepare breakfast.

She placed salt pork in a skillet over the fire and set a pan of biscuits to bake, then filled the blackened coffeepot with water from the kettle.

Soon the little cabin was redolent with the aroma of good food.

Cody came in from the barn, where he had already begun his chores. Immediately Lizzy felt her cheeks grow hot and busied herself at the table when he sat down.

Cody turned to Ned. "If you can spare another day, we could use your help with that axle."

Ned watched as Sara Jean spread blackberry preserves over a warm biscuit and lifted it to her lips.

He cleared his throat. "I guess I can spare one more day. Commencement will still be there tomorrow."

"Good. I'll be out in the barn when you're ready to get started."

Cody pushed away from the table, then turned back. "That was a fine breakfast, Lizzy. Thank you."

He drew on his coat and was gone in a swirl of snowflakes, with Beau at his heels.

"Come on, James," Amos called as he began to pull on his shoes. "You can gather up the wood shavings from the barn. They'll make fine kindling."

As they dressed for the outdoors, Lizzy began gathering up the dishes. She noted Ned and Sara Jean smiling shyly at each other across the table.

"Where do you plan to settle?" Ned asked.

Sara Jean moved her shoulders in a shrug. "Grandpop doesn't know. He just said we'd keep going until we reached California and found a place that suited us."

"But how will I ever know where

to look for you if you don't know where you're headed?"

Sara Jean stared at her plate. The thought of never seeing Ned again was too distressing. "If you're at Commencement, I could always send a letter there telling you where we've put down roots."

Ned shook his head. "I don't know how long I'll be staying there. Cody doesn't have much good to say about the town."

Sara Jean's voice sounded as petulant as a child's. "If you ask me, Cody doesn't have much good to say about anything."

Lizzy clattered dishes in the basin. "That's a fine way to talk about a man who's given us shelter. Besides, he's Ned's brother."

"I don't take offense," Ned said quickly. "Cody's always been prickly. He's a hard man to understand. And after Mary..." He stopped, realizing he was speaking out of turn.

"It's all right, Ned." Lizzy began to wash the dishes, and Sara Jean picked up a towel to dry them. "Cody told me that his wife died two years ago."

Sara Jean turned to her in surprise and Lizzy knew she was bursting with questions.

"What else did he tell you?" Ned studied Sara Jean's glossy yellow curls as she lifted a cup to dry.

Lizzy shrugged. "That's all. Nothing more."

"How did she die?" Sara Jean asked.

"I guess you could say she was a casualty of war." Ned's tone grew

harsh. "After Cody left, she and the baby were on their own way out there on that isolated farm."

"Baby?" Lizzy felt the plate slip from her hands and drop to her feet, where it shattered.

"Yes'm." Ned stooped and began picking up shards of china. "A baby boy."

"How old was he?" Lizzy asked.

Ned lifted his head. "He was almost five when he died along with Mary."

Almost the age of James. Lizzy felt her heart go out to the stern man who had suffered such a loss.

"How did they die?" Sara Jean continued boldly.

At her sister's question, Lizzy held her breath. Though she had no right to such information, the curiosity was eating at her.

"Don't know for sure." Ned replied slowly. "Some say they were bludgeoned by a crazy man. Others said it was a roving band of deserters from General Lee's army at Hagerstown, not far from the Pennsylvania border where Cody had his farm."

Sara Jean glanced at her grandfather.

"Southern soldiers wouldn't harm a woman and babe, would they, Grandpop?"

"I guess," the old man mused aloud, "there was good and evil on both sides. The war did terrible things to people." He glanced toward Ned. "But that doesn't excuse your brother from neglecting his duty. Where was he while his wife and baby were being brutalized?"

Ned flushed. "He was off fighting the war, sir."

Amos pinned him with a fierce look. "Which side did he fight on?"

After an awkward silence Ned said softly, "The North."

"And what about you?" Amos bellowed. "Were you off fighting in the war, too?"

"Yes, sir." Ned studied the toe of his boot. "When the war started, and my grandmother realized that Cody would be serving with the Federals, she packed up and returned to her childhood home in Louisiana, with me in tow. A short time later I joined up to fight under General Braxton Bragg for the Confederate Army of Tennessee."

North against South. Brother against brother.

A terrible silence descended upon the cabin. Amos turned away and snatched up his sheepskin jacket. Even James, as young as he was, seemed to understand the horror of what had been said.

"GRANDPOP, supper's..." The rest of Lizzy's words died on her lips.

While Amos and Ned strained against the ropes and pulleys lifting the wagon, Cody fitted the log into place. He had removed his shirt, and despite the cold of the barn, his skin was slick with sweat.

Lizzy stared at the ripple of muscle across his back and shoulders as he bent to his task. She gave an involuntary shiver.

"That ought to hold it." Cody straightened and ran the back of his

hand across his dripping forehead. "At least until you can get that broken axle to a blacksmith."

"Is there one in Commencement?" Amos asked.

"There was the last time I looked." Cody reached for his shirt and pulled it on.

Amos glanced toward his granddaughter. "Hear that, girl? I'll head on over to town tomorrow with Ned. If there's still a smith, we ought to be on our way within a couple of days."

"That's fine, Grandpop." Lizzy had to dig to muster some enthusiasm. "Supper's ready."

"Did you feed the horses?" Cody asked.

She paused at the door to the barn and glanced back in time to see him tucking his shirt into the waistband of his pants. Fixing her gaze on a spot over his shoulders, she nodded. "They've been taken care of."

"Thank you."

She turned and ran all the way to the cabin.

Inside, the fragrance of freshly baked bread mingled with the sweet scent of wood shavings on the fire.

"Something smells wonderful," Ned commented as he speared a slice of venison and passed the platter to Amos.

"Lizzy baked corn bread. It's Grandpop's favorite." Sara Jean was seated beside Ned. Each time she passed him a plate or bowl, their fingers brushed, causing heat to stain her cheeks.

Ned bit into the corn bread and gave a sigh of pleasure. "It's just

become my favorite, too, Miss Spooner."

Lizzy smiled. "Then I'll have to wrap you some to take along when you leave for Commencement, Ned."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'd be obliged."

"So you'll be leaving in the morning." Cody sipped strong coffee and stared across the table at his brother.

"I only hope the job's still waiting for me."

"If it isn't, you'll need something to hold you over until another job can be found." Cody drained his cup. "After supper I'd like you to pick out fifteen mustangs."

"Why?"

Cody shrugged. "You earned the right to half the herd. You did as much work as I did bringing them in. They should fetch a good price in Commencement. That'll give you a stake."

For a moment Ned seemed thunderstruck.

"BREAKFAST IS READY."

Ned glanced up from the rope he'd been examining. "This one looks sturdy enough to hold better than a dozen frisky mustangs."

He handed it to Cody as they took their places at the table. Cody ran the strands through his fingers, then returned it to his brother with a nod. "That ought to work."

Sara Jean climbed down the ladder. Glancing up, Lizzy tried to hide her surprise.

Sara Jean was wearing her best Sunday dress, which had once belonged to their mother.

Lizzy smiled as she placed a platter of venison on the table. Leave it to Sara Jean to make a lasting impression on the poor boy.

"Now that we're all here," Grandpop said, "we'll say grace."

They bowed their heads.

"For this food we thank You, Lord. Stay our feet along a safe trail to Commencement."

With a murmured amen they began to pass the food.

"I've been thinking, Grandpop." Sara Jean chose her words carefully. "We all know that sometimes you have trouble with your eyes." When he opened his mouth to protest, she added quickly, "At least when the light begins to fade. Now on the journey to Commencement, you'll have Ned along to guide you. But on the journey back, you'll have no one."

Lizzy's head came up. For once, her sister made sense. "Sara Jean's right, Grandpop. I don't know what we were thinking of. You ought to have someone with you."

Amos studied his younger granddaughter, sitting as close to Ned as she dared. He knew what she was up to. "And you think that someone ought to be you, Sara Jean?"

"James is too young for such a long journey. And Lizzy takes much better care of him than I do, so she really ought to stay here with him. And I thought maybe we'll find a doctor in Commencement."

"Seems to me you've done an

awful lot of thinking on this, Sara Jean." Grandpop's eyebrows drew together as he regarded her over the rim of his cup.

"I have. And I've been praying on it, too, Grandpop."

"Well," he admitted, "I do have trouble seeing when the light fades. And a town the size of Commencement might have a doctor."

"I'll be ready, Grandpop." She flew to the ladder and began to climb to the loft. "By the time you get the wagon hitched, I'll be waiting."

In no time, it seemed, the door to the cabin opened and Sara Jean made her way to the wagon, followed by Lizzy and James.

Ned helped Sara Jean up to the seat of the wagon.

"You'll need this," Cody said, handing Amos a fur robe.

"Much obliged." The old man draped it over Sara Jean's lap, then cleared his throat in agitation. "James, you mind your sister, now."

"Yes, sir."

"Lizzy..." He shrugged. "No need giving you orders. I know I can trust you to do what's right. We'll be back in a couple of days."

Lizzy swallowed, wishing there was some way she could say the words she felt in her heart. What if she never saw Sara Jean and Grandpop again? She loved them so much. But the words just wouldn't come. Instead, she merely called, "Good-bye, Grandpop. Sara Jean."

"Do you think Grandpop is in Commencement yet?" James glanced at Cody, who sat at the head of the table.

"I don't know, son. With only one horse pulling that wagon through the snow, thirty miles will seem like a mighty long trek."

James pushed away from the table and pressed his nose to the window. "It's snowing again. Do you think Grandpop could get lost like before?"

Cody stood up and crossed the room to stand behind the little boy. "You're worried, aren't you?"

The little boy nodded. In a frightened voice, he said, "I'm afraid Grandpop and Sara Jean will end up like Pa and Ma."

Cody thought about his own care-free childhood, and found himself cursing the circumstances that had robbed so many children of such a blessing.

"Sometimes, James," he said softly, "you just have to trust that everything will be all right."

"Do you?"

Cody nodded. "Of course I do. You'll see. They'll be back in a couple of days."

Within minutes the little boy began petting Beau. Before long the big dog was sprawled out in front of the fire, with James asleep against his neck.

As Lizzy finished the dishes, she turned to see Cody wrapping James in a fur robe. For a moment her heart stopped as she thought about the way her father had looked, so

strong and handsome, carrying his infant son to bed.

Cody watched as she untied her apron and smoothed her skirts. Her hair had pulled loose from its neat knot.

"There's coffee," she said.

"It isn't coffee I want."

As she started past him, he dropped his hands to her shoulders.

She stopped in midstride, as if frozen.

"For the longest time I've wanted to do this." Reaching up, he removed the pins from her hair and watched as it tumbled down past her waist. His eyes narrowed as he plunged his hands into the tangles.

"You mustn't do this, Cody."

"Shh."

He stared into her wide eyes and slowly combed his fingers through the waves, reveling in their silken texture.

"How could I have forgotten what a woman feels like?" He moved his big hands across the slope of her shoulders, down her sides, then up her back, sending shivers of pure delight along her spine.

"And the taste of a woman." He expertly parted her lips with his tongue and drank long and deep from her mouth.

Her muffled objection was forgotten. Even while she lifted her hands to push him away, her limbs betrayed her. Her arms encircled him, pulling him close, while her mouth moved under his, eager, avid.

He kissed her with a hunger that matched her own. With teeth and

tongue and lips, seducing, possessing. She clung to him, eager to taste, to feel. To give.

When Cody moved his hands along her spine, she felt his touch over every inch of her body. Her breasts tingled with unexpected need. Her thighs pressed to his, filling her veins with liquid fire.

He tore his mouth from hers and pressed it to the soft, sensitive hollow of her throat. When she moaned softly and moved in his arms, he became inflamed, pressing hot, moist kisses along her neck to her shoulder.

He struggled to hold on to some sense of sanity. But the need for her had him slipping over the edge. He wanted to be free to touch and taste and explore until they were both sated.

Desire clawed at him, driving him closer to the edge.

"I want you, Lizzy." He spoke the words against her mouth. "Say that you want me, too."

"No. I... No."

She tried to remember what Grandpop had said before he left. Something about trusting her to always do the right thing. But the words were lost in the buzzing in her mind. She couldn't think. Couldn't even hold a coherent thought. All she could do was cling to him and soar higher while his hands and lips drove her mad.

What had happened to him? All that cool control had suddenly been torn free, and he'd become some sort of madman.

Framing her face with his hands,

he rested his forehead against hers for a moment, struggling for breath. Very deliberately he placed his hands on her shoulders and took a step back, needing a moment to clear his head.

When he looked at her, his eyes were dark. And cold as ice.

"I'm going to check on the mare before I turn in."

She watched as he pulled on his jacket and strode out into the night.

For long minutes she remained standing, as still as a statue, staring at the closed door. Then, climbing the ladder to the loft, she undressed and covered herself with the fur wrap.

More than an hour passed before Cody returned. Lizzy heard his boots drop, then listened to the wind howling against the walls.

It shamed her to admit that, had it not been for Cody's strength of will, she would be downstairs right now, lying in his arms.

*

LIZZY WAS awake before dawn. It had been the longest night of her life. As soon as the first light of dawn streaked the sky, she dressed and hurried downstairs to start breakfast.

The first thing she noticed was that Cody's blanket was empty.

When he returned from the barn, she would have to pretend she wasn't aware of him.

As she added more logs to the fire, James stirred, then sat up.

"Is it morning already?"

"Just barely. If you'd like to sleep a little longer, you go ahead."

He glanced at the empty blanket. "Where's Cody?"

"Probably out in the barn."

James jumped up and began dressing. "Maybe he'll let me help with the horses."

The door opened. Cody stamped snow from his boots and took off his coat. Snowflakes glistened in his dark hair.

"I'll be gone for a couple of days," he announced without warning. "Think you and the boy will be all right alone?"

When Lizzy turned anxious eyes to him, he looked away. Though he would give her a reason why he was leaving, it would be a lie. He was leaving not only because of what had happened last night, but also because of what had almost happened. He couldn't afford to be around her another night. He didn't have that much willpower.

"Where are you going?" James asked.

"I spotted hoofprints in the snow. Looks like a good-size herd of mustangs. Thought I'd trail them."

Cody found himself grateful for all the little boy's questions. It kept him from thinking about the woman who had suddenly complicated his life.

"What if the mare starts to foal?"

"She won't. She still has a bit more time."

"What if Grandpop returns and wants to get back on the trail?"

Cody glanced at Lizzy, then away. The thought had occurred to

him. "I guess you'll have to do what your grandfather wants."

"But we wouldn't get to say goodbye."

"We'll say it now. And if there's anything you've forgotten to say, you can leave me a note."

"I can't write yet."

"I'm sure your sister can write it for you."

"It's not the same."

"I know, James." He pushed back his chair and stood, towering over the little boy. "You be sure to help your sister with the horses."

Taking a rifle from a shelf, Cody handed it to Lizzy.

"This rifle has been oiled and cleaned and filled with ammunition." He dropped a small sack of bullets into her hand. "Do you know how to load it?"

"Yes."

"Good." She smelled of soap and water. "Keep this rifle with you. When you go to the barn, it goes with you. When you're here in the cabin, you have it by the door."

She nodded.

He was laying too much responsibility on her. But he didn't see any choice. She'd become a fever in his blood. If he could just avoid her for a couple of days, she and her family would be gone.

"I'll be back in two or three days."

She swallowed and found that no words would come. She looked down, blinking furiously, hoping he wouldn't see the tears that threatened.

Cody closed the door firmly be-

hind him. As Lizzy and James watched through the window, he pulled himself into the saddle and set off across the snow-covered meadow.

THE DAY PASSED in a blur of work. Lizzy decided to make a special supper, so in the early afternoon she cut up chunks of venison and carrots and potatoes and placed them in a pot over the fire.

She and James fed and watered the mustangs, always careful to stay outside the corral. With half their number gone to Commencement, the horses had room to run and leap and nip at one another. Fascinated by their antics, Lizzy and James leaned against the rails.

Lizzy glanced at the darkening sky and picked up the bucket. "Come on, James. We'd better feed the mare and get back to the cabin. It'll be dark soon. Besides, I'm eager to eat that stew I put over the fire."

"Me, too. And the biscuits. I can smell them out here."

She led the way to the barn. Inside, it was warmed by the hay and the heat from the mare as she moved restlessly in her stall.

Lizzy mucked the stall and spread fresh straw while James carried a bucket of water and filled the trough with oats.

They both looked up at the sound of horses' hooves, riding in hard and fast.

"Do you think it's Grandpop and Sara Jean?"

"I don't hear a wagon." Lizzy picked up the rifle and headed toward the door of the barn.

The little boy's eyes lit. "Then it must be Cody, back with more mustangs."

"Maybe. But until I'm sure, you get under that straw and stay there." She checked to see that the boy had done as she ordered. Then, throwing the brace, she opened the door a crack and stole a peek. What she saw turned her blood to ice.

There were five horsemen circling the corral. And though she couldn't see their faces, she knew immediately that they were the same five who had threatened to steal Cody's horses.

CODY FOLLOWED the hoofprints up a steep incline. There was no doubt that they were mustangs. None of the horses were shod.

Leaving Lizzy and James alone in his cabin still nagged at the edges of his mind. But he'd been given no choice. After last night, he knew what would happen if he stayed. An innocent like Lizzy deserved better.

As he stared out, he was reminded of another time, another place. It had been winter when he'd left Mary and little Rob and went off to do what he'd been trained at West Point to do. And while he'd been away, trying to hold the country together, his whole reason for living had been torn apart.

He wondered again, as he had so often since that time, why his life had been spared when so many

other people had died. With his wife and son brutally murdered, he'd lost the will to live. It was only here, in this pristine wilderness, that he'd begun to heal.

Deep in thought, it took him a minute to realize that the hoofprints that crisscrossed in the snow were not the ones he'd been following. These horses were shod.

As he climbed from the saddle and studied them more carefully, his heart began to race.

There were five of them. One had a distinctive circular groove in its right front hoof. He'd seen that same print in the snow in front of his cabin the morning after Ned had arrived. It belonged to the horse ridden by the one called Whit.

From the wide spaces between the prints, he determined that these horses were traveling at a gallop. And headed toward his cabin.

God in heaven. Lizzy and James were there alone.

Pulling himself into the saddle, he called to Beau and set out at a gallop. His jaw clenched in anger. It couldn't be happening again. He wouldn't let it.

LIZZY SLAMMED the door and threw the board that braced it.

"Who's there?" James called from his hiding place.

"Those men who came by the other night."

"They'll steal Cody's horses."

"Be quiet, James, and let me think."

Maybe, if she was lucky, they

would just take the mustangs and leave. Even as she prayed it would be so, she knew better. Seeing the horseflesh in the corral, these men would want to see if something better was kept in the barn.

Her heart was pounding. If they found the door locked from the inside, they would know that someone was in here.

She looked around for another way out. There was none.

She heard the rattling of the door and knew that someone was trying to pry it open.

"James," she called, picking up the rifle, "cover yourself with straw. No matter what, don't show yourself unless I say so. Do you hear me? No matter what, you mustn't let them know you're here."

She heard muffled voices from beyond the door.

"It's locked. Someone's in there, I tell you."

"Cody Martin," came a deep voice Lizzy recognized as belonging to Whit, the leader. "Come out now with your hands up. If we have to go in and get you, we're coming in with guns blazing."

After a few moments of silence Lizzy heard muffled comments, followed by a low rumble of laughter. She listened to the crunch of snow as several booted feet walked the perimeter of the barn.

"So, Martin," the leader shouted. "You have only one way out. Unless you come out by the count of five, we're going to burn you out."

Lizzy's throat went dry. For a moment she felt paralyzed as she re-

alized the enormity of their threat. A minute later she smelled the stench of smoke as the fire began to lick along the timbers.

Now it was not just her life that hung in the balance. There was no way to protect James from that fire. And when she brought him out, they would kill him, as well.

"Lizzy. What'll we do?" Her brother crawled from his place of concealment, his eyes enormous with fear.

"If we go out there, they'll kill us," she said firmly.

"If we don't, we'll burn."

There might still be a way, she decided.

"Come on, James."

She strode into the mare's stall, with James tugging on her skirts.

"Cody said we couldn't come in here."

"Easy," Lizzy crooned, catching the terrified animal's head. "James, hand me that bit and bridle. And move very slowly. We wouldn't want to spook her."

The little boy did as he was told. Lizzy eased the bit between the mare's teeth and slid the bridle over her head. "Now, James, we're going to slip you on her back. She's too fat to saddle, so you're going to have to ride her bareback."

"Ride?"

"Now you listen, James. What I'm going to tell you is very important." Holding the reins, Lizzy eased him onto the back of the horse. "Do you remember the trail we took here, across the flat meadow, then through the hills?"

He nodded.

"You're going to take the same trail out of here. You don't stop, no matter what. You just give the mare her head and keep riding until you either find Cody or you get to Commencement."

"But what about you?"

"I have to stay here, James. And see that nobody stops you."

"But I don't under—"

"There's no time," Lizzy turned as the wall beside them went up in flames. Leading the mare, she headed her into the wall of flame. "You're going to race right through that back wall, James. And you're never going to look back."

"I can't."

"Do it for Pa. Make me proud, James." She felt the tears course along her cheeks as she slapped the mare's rump as hard as she could.

The terrified animal raced into the wall of flame, with the little boy clinging to the reins. Moments later they broke free and sped across the field of white.

With smoke and flames blinding her, Lizzy leapt out of the way of a fiery timber. She could wait no longer. Any minute now, the entire roof would cave in. The barn had become an inferno.

*

CODY CRESTED a hill and looked down on a scene of horror. Black smoke filled the air. Flames leapt high as his barn crumbled in on itself.

In the corral the horses milled

around in fear. A man could be seen moving among them, securing them with ropes.

Three other men were moving stealthily around the burning rubble. All held rifles in their hands. Even as he watched, Cody spotted movement on the far side of the burning barn.

God in heaven. Lizzy. Standing alone, rifle in hand, about to face certain death.

He'd hoped and prayed that she would be safe in the cabin. Now he knew her fate. And what was worse, he would be forced to be a witness to her death, and would be helpless to stop it.

He knew that from this distance he wouldn't reach her in time. But at least, he reasoned, those savages would pay.

He pulled himself into the saddle and lifted the rifle to his shoulder. As soon as he was within range, they would feel the sting of his fury.

"WILL YOU LOOK at this."

As the three men rounded the side of the burning barn, they stopped short at the sight of the woman in the soot-blackened gown, holding a rifle at her shoulder.

"You don't look like Cody Martin to me."

"Stop right there." Lizzy's eyes narrowed as the men glanced at each other, then continued moving toward her.

"I'm not a very good shot." Her finger was slippery on the trigger, and she longed to rub it on her skirt.

But she knew she couldn't afford even a moment's distraction. "So don't make me angry. There's no telling who might get shot by accident."

The three men glanced at each other for direction.

One of them grinned. "We don't want to see anybody shot. Just put down the rifle."

"You don't understand," she said evenly. "I'm not putting down this rifle until you ride out of here. Now get on your horses."

"All right."

The two glanced at the third in surprise. He merely smiled and said, "Go get our horses, boys."

She watched as, moments later, the two rounded the burning rubble on their horses, leading a third. She felt a wave of relief and glanced toward the corral, where a man could be seen leading a string of mustangs.

Too late, an alarm sounded in her mind. "Where is the fifth man?"

"Right here," came a voice behind her.

She whirled to see James struggling in the arms of a man on horseback. "Is this little ragamuffin yours?" he asked.

James was crying. She saw blood on the front of his clothes.

In the next instant she saw a flash of fur and heard the savage snarls of a wild creature as Beau leapt through the air, closing his jaws around the horseman's shoulder.

James dropped to the snow at her feet.

Something in Lizzy's mind seemed to snap. She could focus on

only one thing. James hadn't escaped. Unless she acted immediately, these men were going to harm her little brother.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion. She saw the man on horseback reach for his gun. She fired, and was only dimly aware that he clutched his chest and dropped to the ground, with a snarling Beau on top of him.

She turned and fired again and again at the men racing toward her.

It seemed to Lizzy that even after her rifle was empty, the sound of gunfire continued. The roar of gunfire echoed through her mind as she bent and wrapped her arms around her little brother and cradled him to her chest.

"Oh, James. Hush now. Don't cry. No one's ever going to hurt you."

She crooned gentle words of love as she kissed away his tears and ran a hand across his bloodstained chest. Though there was blood on his clothing, she could find no wound. She lifted him, eager to get him inside where it was safe and warm.

She knew only one thing as she stepped around the bodies and carried James toward the cabin. These men would never hurt her little brother again.

CODY SAW what was happening as he sped down the ravine behind the barn. His heart nearly stopped when he saw the horseman carrying James. Beau needed no command.

When the first gunshots rang out,

Cody didn't have the luxury of sorting out who was shot. He dropped one of the men with his first shot, and before he could fire off another, he saw one of the gunmen drop. That meant that Lizzy must still be alive and fighting.

He opened fire on another gunman, then was caught by crossfire from the man in the corral.

Pinned down, Cody managed to crawl to the cover of a rock. By the time he brought down the only gunman still facing Lizzy, he heard the thunder of hoofbeats and realized that the one in the corral had gotten away.

The sudden stillness frightened Cody more than the sound of gunshots echoing across the hills.

For a moment he was afraid to look. Afraid of what he'd see. When he pivoted toward the place where Lizzy had been standing, he saw a tiny figure moving slowly across the snowy expanse toward the cabin. With a shout he began to run. When he drew closer, he could see that Lizzy was carrying her little brother.

In that moment, Cody could taste the fear, bitter and foul in his throat, as he struggled to speak.

"Lizzy, is James...?" He couldn't say the word.

"They were going to kill him," she said softly. Too softly. "He's wounded."

Cody felt his heart begin to beat again. He wasn't dead.

"How bad is it?"

"I don't know." She snatched him away when Cody reached for him.

Seeing the set of her jaw, Cody realized that she had to do this herself. He walked along beside her and opened the door. She went to the rug and laid James down, then began removing his jacket and shirt.

"What are you doing?" the little boy demanded.

"Be still, boy. Your sister said you were wounded."

"They didn't hurt me, Lizzy."

"But the blood..."

"That was the bad man's blood. I bit him."

Cody looked thunderstruck. When he could find his voice, he threw back his head and started laughing. "You bit him?"

"Uh-huh. And that's when he hit me. But I didn't cry until I saw that they were going to hurt Lizzy. Then I cried hard. I guess that makes me a baby, doesn't it?"

"No, son." Cody hugged the boy close to his heart. "Crying doesn't make you a baby. What you did was brave. And your sister..."

Cody noticed that Lizzy had walked to the fireplace and was stirring something in a pot.

"What are you doing?"

"The stew," she said softly. "I promised James a special dinner tonight."

Cody crossed the room and took the big wooden spoon from her hand. "Lizzy, what you did out there..." He noticed that she was shivering violently and drew her into the circle of his arms. "That was very brave."

"Not brave. I killed those men," she said softly. "Because they were

going to hurt James. I had to kill them."

"Yes, you did. And you were very brave."

"No." She shook her head and pushed away from him. Drawing her arms around herself, she said, "I was afraid. I've never killed a man before."

"Sit over here," Cody said, leading her toward the rocking chair. "James, get your sister one of those furs."

Cody pushed her gently down in the rocking chair and wrapped the fur around her.

"I'll see to supper," he said gently. "You sit here."

He left her, rocking quietly, to prepare a meal for the little boy.

While James ate, he filled Cody in on what had happened. "And Lizzy said I had to ride through the wall of fire and keep on riding until I found you or got to Commencement."

"That's just about the bravest thing I've ever heard of," Cody said.

"What about your mare?" James fretted. "Will she run off and be wild again?"

"Beau will bring her back. He'll stand guard until I get a proper shelter."

The little boy glanced at his sister, rocking gently, her gaze fixed on the flames of the fire. "Will Lizzy be all right?"

"Yes. But she needs a little time to herself."

A short time later Cody wrapped the little boy in a fur robe and lis-

tened to his prayers. Then he made a cup of tea laced with whiskey and placed it in Lizzy's cold hands.

"Drink this," he said softly.

She looked surprised to see him. "Cody? I'm sorry about your horses."

"What about them?"

She tried to remember. "I think they were stolen."

"No, Lizzy. You stopped the thieves."

"I did?" She sipped the tea.

He knew the moment when she remembered. A chill shot through her.

"James." Her hand shook and some of the tea spilled on the floor.

She started to clean it up, but Cody placed a hand on her arm. "Leave it. James is sleeping."

She gazed tenderly at the figure of the little boy on the rug in front of the fire. "I'm sorry about those men. But I couldn't let them harm James."

"Don't be sorry, Lizzy. It was their choice to bring death and destruction on themselves." He waited until she'd emptied the cup, then took it from her hands. "I had no right to leave you alone."

"It wasn't your fault."

"If anything had happened to you or your brother, I would never be able to forgive myself."

She touched a finger to his lips to stop his words. "We've intruded on your life, Cody. We've robbed you of your freedom. And now, because of your kindness, you've lost your barn and your beautiful mare."

He smiled at the sound of Beau's

barking. "Unless I miss my guess, the mare is right outside, with Beau standing watch. As far as the barn is concerned, it can be rebuilt. But you, Lizzy—" he touched a finger to her cheek "—there could never be another one as precious as you."

She felt tears well up in her eyes and lowered her head to hide her weakness.

"I'm tired, Cody. So tired."

She stood and began to walk to the ladder. But before she took two steps, all the blood seemed to drain from her. She turned as pale as the snow outside the window. Before she could drop to the floor Cody caught her and scooped her into his arms. Gathering her close to his chest, he carried her to a pile of furs and lowered her to them, wrapping her in them as he lay beside her.

Through the long night he held her. Whenever she awoke, he soothed her with murmured words or the gentle brush of his lips across her cheek.

He'd been given a very special gift, he realized. Another chance. This time, he would keep all those in his charge safe.

LIZZY AWOKE to the aroma of freshly baked biscuits. Venison and potatoes sizzled in a skillet.

She sat up and glanced at the man who moved around the table, filling a plate for James.

When Cody saw her, he hurried over. "You stay here, Lizzy, and I'll bring you something to eat."

"I can walk to the table."

"You need your rest."

She smiled at the look of concern in his eyes. "Cody, I'm fine."

"But last night..."

"I was tired and confused. Today I feel strong enough to face up to what happened."

"It was my fault. I never should have left you alone."

She shook her head. "We are not your responsibility. You had every right to go after that herd of mustangs."

His voice deepened. "That wasn't really why I left."

She shook her head to stop him. She would hear no more. Besides, she was afraid of what he might say. Afraid and ashamed. What they had shared had been too filled with passion to speak about.

*

"IT'S GRANDPOP," James called.

They hurried around to the front of the cabin just as the horse drew to a halt. The cabin door opened and Lizzy stepped out onto the porch.

"What happened to the barn?" Amos called.

"A little trouble." Cody glanced at Lizzy, then back to Amos. "I'll tell you about it later. Was the blacksmith able to fix the axle?"

"See for yourself," Amos invited, stepping wearily down.

He helped Sara Jean to the ground and she pressed a hand to the stiffness at her back.

Cody crawled under the wagon and carefully inspected the axle. He

got to his feet, dusting his hands on his pants. "He did a good job."

"That he did." Amos tousled his grandson's hair and dropped an arm around Lizzy's shoulders. "I sure hope you have some supper left, girl. It's been a long ride."

"Come on inside, Grandpop. There's plenty."

"Where will I put my horse?" Amos asked.

"I'll take the wagon around to the back. There's a shelter big enough for him and the mare."

"She hasn't foaled yet?" Sara Jean asked.

"She's waiting for you." Lizzy grabbed her sister's hands and drew her close for a quick kiss on the cheek.

"Then she won't have long to wait." Sara Jean moved slowly toward the door, and Lizzy noticed that she winced as she walked.

"You mean the baby's coming? Did you find a doctor in Commencement?"

"Yes and no," Sara Jean answered quickly. "Grandpop finally located the doctor, in the saloon. Grandpop said his words were all slurred when he told him he wouldn't ride this far to deliver a baby if the mother were the Queen of Sheba. So it looks like it's going to be up to you, Lizzy."

Lizzy turned a worried look in Cody's direction. Facing five gunmen was nothing compared with the thought of helping her sister deliver a baby.

Amos followed Cody to the small shelter behind the cabin. When they

were alone inside, he said, "Now maybe you'd better tell me what happened here."

"WE CAN GO up on that ridge and cut timber," Amos said the next morning, over breakfast. "James and I can haul the logs back in the wagon. Why, we can have that barn rebuilt in no time."

"It isn't your obligation," Cody said firmly.

"We accepted your hospitality when we needed it. Now you'll do the same." Amos softened his tone. "Besides, the women will need a few days to mend the canvas. And if Sara Jean has that baby, she'll be grateful for the extra time to build up her strength for the journey ahead."

"How BIG was Commencement?" Lizzy and Sara Jean sat at opposite sides of the table, mending the seams in the tattered canvas.

"It wouldn't have been worth mentioning back in Georgia," Sara Jean said with a laugh. "But after all those miles of wilderness, it looked big enough to me."

"Where did you and Grandpop sleep?"

"The blacksmith sent us to one of the houses on the edge of town. The widow Purdy runs a boardinghouse. Oh, Lizzy, she had real feather beds with rag rugs on the floors and frilly white curtains at the windows." Sara Jean's eyes danced. "Grandpop said it was the best night's sleep he's had in years."

For a minute Sara Jean's needle and thread were forgotten as she smiled. "As soon as Mrs. Purdy laid eyes on Grandpop, it was plain she was sweet on him."

"Sara Jean." Lizzy was clearly shocked. "How can you say such a thing?"

"Furthermore, if you ask me," Sara Jean went on, "I think Grandpop was sweet on her, too."

Lizzy walked to the fire to stir the pot of stew. Before she could ponder all that her sister had told her, the men stomped into the cabin.

Removing the canvas, Sara Jean hurriedly set the table while Lizzy ladled food onto their plates.

They bowed their heads while Grandpop said, "We thank Thee for this food, Lord. And for the fine timber Thou hast provided. With Thy help, the new barn should be up in no time."

"Amen," the others intoned as they began to pass around heaping plates of stew.

"Sara Jean said that Ned's job with the stagecoach was still waiting for him," Lizzy commented.

Cody's fork paused in midair. His eyes narrowed slightly. "So he took it?"

"He said the pay was too good to pass up."

"Did he know how far the run would be?"

"Between Commencement and a place called Los Ranchos de Albuquerque."

"That's over a hundred miles. What're they carrying?"

"Gold," Amos said softly. "At least from what I heard."

Cody's voice lowered. "If you heard it, it stands to reason that everyone else did, too. That's why no one was willing to take the job except a greenhorn. Every gunslinger from here to Texas will be watching that stage."

*

SARA JEAN BEGAN to moan as another pain surged. This time the pain didn't stop, but went on and on until Lizzy said softly, "The baby's coming, Sara Jean. Just bear down now. And in a few minutes you'll be able to greet your new baby."

Outside, Cody heard the cry, more like the bleat of a lamb than a human sound. He crushed his cigarette into the snow and began running toward the cabin.

When the door opened, two heads turned toward the sound. Lizzy was kneeling beside her sister. Her cheeks glistened with tears. Sara Jean wore a radiant smile. In her arms was a tiny bundle.

"Look, Cody. Come see my beautiful daughter."

Moments later Amos and James rushed inside, looking disoriented.

Sara Jean smiled dreamily at her grandfather and little brother. "Come see what I did."

As the two knelt beside her, she unwrapped the bundle to display her new baby. Grandpop kept clearing his throat.

At his first glimpse, James was clearly enthralled.

Sara Jean touched a finger to the baby's cheek. "She's my little angel. And I've decided to name her Josephine Elizabeth, after Ma and Lizzy."

Lizzy felt her heart swell with pride and happiness.

"Josephine Elizabeth." James tried out the name.

"Mighty big words for such a little creature," Grandpop muttered. "How about..." He thought a minute. "Jobeth?"

Sara Jean's smile grew. She placed a hand inside her grandfather's callused palm. "Jobeth. I like that, Grandpop." Her lids closed from sheer exhaustion. "Say good-night to your great-granddaughter Jobeth."

THE DAYS that followed flowed easily from one to the next. Cody and Amos fashioned a cradle from pine, and Lizzy stitched a quilt to line it.

Each morning the men went up to the hills and cut trees, then hauled them by wagon to the blackened space that had once been Cody's barn.

Within a week there were enough logs to begin forming the walls of the barn. Cody and Amos notched them into place, then sealed the logs with hot pitch. When the walls were complete, they built the roof. On the day they set the door into place and swung it closed, they sent up a cheer.

Cody led the mare and his stallion from their cramped quarters in the

lean-to and brought them to their new stalls in the barn.

"I think she likes it here," Lizzy leaned over the rail and watched as the mare began to eat.

Cody glanced around. The others had gone back to the cabin.

"It will certainly be easier for her to foal here."

"How soon?"

He felt the mare's belly and crooned soothing words to her as she neatly sidestepped. "Another week. At the latest."

Cody breathed deeply. The structure smelled of new wood and sweet fresh hay and the sharp, pungent odor of newly turned earth.

It was quiet. Outside, the wind sighed and moaned as it swept across the meadow and fled up to the high country.

Inside, the light was filtered, casting them in a dim, golden glow. He turned, intending only to look at Lizzy. But the moment he looked, he had the overpowering need to touch.

He lifted a hand to her cheek and she moved against it, dropping her head so that her hair swirled forward.

"Oh, Lizzy. The things I feel..." He swallowed and opened his palm to caress her lips.

When she didn't move to stop him, he grew bolder, bringing both hands up to frame her face. That was all it took to have his heart pounding in his chest. One simple touch and he found himself wishing...

If only they had met at another

time, another place. Before the world had gone mad and the country had become divided.

"What are you doing?"

"Touching you."

She lifted a hand to his face and traced the craggy contour of his cheek beneath the rough beard, the curve of his jaw, the outline of his lips.

He stood very still, fighting the feelings that ripped through him.

"I want you to hold me, Cody."

"I can't."

He knew she was hurt by his rejection, but he made no move to comfort her.

"Why?"

"Because—" his voice was ragged, as if torn from his throat after an uphill climb "—if I do, I won't be able to let you go."

*

IT SNOWED all the next day and the day after, before finally letting up late at night. Lizzy awoke and listened to the silence that had settled over the land. But by suppertime the wind was coming up again. Amos cocked his head to hear it whistle past the roof. "Maybe by morning the drifts will be blown clear away."

Lizzy saw the sad expression on her little brother's face and hoped her own hadn't given her away.

When the meal was over, Amos busied himself at the fire, cleaning his pipe and refilling it. James pulled on his boots and reached for his jacket.

"Where are you going?" Lizzy looked up from the table she was clearing.

"I just want to check on the mare in the barn."

She glanced at Cody for approval. He gave the boy a smile.

"I was just thinking I'd get another load of wood for the fire," Cody said. "I'll go with you."

The door closed, shutting out their voices along with the wind and snow.

Lizzy filled a basin with hot water and began to wash the dishes. Minutes later the door slammed open and James's voice was high with excitement.

"Grandpop. Lizzy. The mare's foaling. And Cody says, if it's all right with you, I can stay and watch."

With a yelp of excitement Lizzy grabbed up a fur robe while Amos pulled on jacket and hat.

"Come on, James." Lizzy caught his hand and together they ran to the barn, with Amos trailing more slowly.

Inside, the single lantern cast a glow in the stall. The mare's breathing was strained. Still fighting the pain, she moved restlessly around the stall.

Cody turned as Lizzy and her little brother entered, followed by Amos. It pleased him that they wanted to share this special event.

"LOOK, JAMES. The foal is coming."

Lizzy lifted the little boy in her

arms so that he could have a clear view over the rails of the stall.

It was happening so quickly, he was afraid to blink for fear he would miss something. With his eyes wide he watched as the foal, encased in a sack of fluid, slid easily from its mother.

"It's a colt," Cody announced.

"A boy," James whispered.

"Want to give him a name, James?"

The little boy grew silent, listening to the sound of the wind howling outside. Then, with a smile, he said, "Stormy."

"Stormy." Cody tried it out, then nodded. "I think it suits him."

Within minutes the mare had licked her foal clean and lay nuzzling it gently with her mouth and tongue.

Watching the proud mare scramble to her feet while her trembling foal struggled to stand, Lizzy felt tears fill her eyes. It was always the same, and yet always so different.

"Look at him," Cody said, as proud as any father. "He has grit."

His voice thickened with passion. "Look at his lines. When he's old enough to breed, he's going to give me the purest stock this part of the country has ever seen."

He looked up. "What do you think, James? Isn't Stormy just about the prettiest thing you've ever seen?"

When there was no response, Lizzy glanced down at the little boy in her arms. He had tried valiantly to remain awake for this moment.

And though he had witnessed the birth, he could no longer fight sleep.

A slow smile touched Cody's lips as Amos took the boy from his granddaughter's arms.

"The old and the young can only take so much excitement," Amos murmured. "We'll leave you two to admire the proud mama and her new offspring."

"Good night, Grandpop." Lizzy kissed his cheek.

"Good night, Amos."

"Good night, Cody. Congratulations on a fine foal." The old man hugged the little boy to his heart and made his way from the barn.

Cody stepped from the stall and closed the gate. Leaning against it, he watched as the mare stood over the foal, nudging it into another feeble attempt to stand.

Cody and Lizzy shared a laugh.

"Poor thing," Lizzy murmured. "He's still too wobbly."

"Isn't he beautiful?" Cody turned to her with a gleam of pride.

He kept his gaze on her. "I don't know why I'm so excited. He's only a horse, but..."

"Only a horse? Look at him, Cody. He's absolutely perfect."

When she turned to him, he touched a hand to her cheek. That was, he told himself firmly, all the luxury he would allow himself to indulge in. One touch.

But he hadn't counted on the magic of the moment.

In her excitement, Lizzy clutched his arm and stared up at him with a smile that made his heart turn over.

For just a moment he forgot his

promise to himself. The need to touch her was too great.

And so he allowed his hand to roam her face. His fingers were rough and callused against the incredible softness of her skin.

"You're the one who's perfect Lizzy." His voice was hardly more than a whisper as he drew her closer and brushed his lips through a tangle of hair at her temple. "You're so warm and vital. So innocent."

She couldn't wait any longer for the touch of his lips on hers. Without a thought to what she was doing she curled her arms around his neck and lifted her face for his kiss.

Her eyes were closed, her lips pursed invitingly.

His tone suddenly hardened. "You'd better go back to the cabin now."

Her eyes blinked open.

He could read her disappointment. But it was best this way.

"You heard me, Lizzy. Get out of here."

She picked up the fur robe and draped it around herself. As she walked toward the door, she suddenly stopped and turned. In the light of the lantern she could see the pain in his eyes. With fists clenched, he turned away.

A moment later he heard her voice directly behind him. "No, Cody. You can't send me away. This may be the last night we'll ever be together. And if it is, I want to spend it here. With you."

"Don't you understand?" His tone was as cold as he could make it. "If you stay, there'll be no turn-

ing back. I don't have the strength to keep turning away from you. And tomorrow, you won't be the same as you are right now. Nothing will be the same."

She met his look evenly. Her voice was clear and steady. "I want to stay, Cody. You can't make me leave."

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"I DON'T WANT regrets, Lizzy."

Cody needed something to do, to keep from dragging her against him like a savage. And so he turned away from her, hoping to give her a chance to change her mind.

A part of him wanted her to go. His heart silently begged her to stay.

"There won't be any regrets." She tossed the fur robe down on the hay.

"There will be, Lizzy." He turned and caught her roughly by the shoulders, as if to shake her. But the moment his hands touched her, they gentled, moving slowly down her arms. "But not tonight." Even his voice gentled. "Tonight there will be just us." His strong fingers closed around her upper arms, dragging her closer. "Just this."

His mouth moved slowly, deliberately over hers until her lips parted. His tongue tangled with hers, tempting her, until she sighed and gave herself up to the pleasure of his kiss.

His lips whispered over her face, seeking, soothing, as he pressed kisses to her closed eyelids, her cheek, her jaw.

"Lizzy, Lizzy." He whispered her name like a benediction.

On his lips, her name sounded beautiful.

With his tongue he traced the curve of her ear, pausing to nibble and tug at her lobe.

She shivered and tried to draw away but he held her close, burning a trail of hot, wet kisses along her throat. Her heart began a painful hammering in her chest.

With his lips on hers he lowered her to the fur robe.

"There's still time to run, Lizzy."

At the look in his eyes she felt her breath hitch in her throat. Pressing a hand to his chest, she could feel his heartbeat.

"I can't, Cody. I can't leave you." She twined her arms around his neck and drew his head down for another drugging kiss.

"And I don't have the strength to make you leave." The words were spoken against her mouth as he covered her lips with his.

A single lantern hung on a peg, casting a pale yellow glow over the man and woman who could hear nothing except the beating of their own hearts.

Cody struggled to hold his own needs at bay. He cautioned himself to go slowly, to make this first time as pleasurable as possible for her.

His kisses were gentle, almost reverent. With lips and fingertips he explored her face, her neck, her soft, sensitive throat. And with each brush of his lips and tongue he felt her body grow more tense.

He wouldn't think about tomorrow. There was no future. And for tonight, there was no past.

As her blood heated and her body pulsed, Lizzy felt the fire seep through her veins. The world outside the door no longer mattered.

Whenever she became alarmed at what she was about to do, whenever her eyes reflected panic, his movements slowed, and with lips and fingertips he soothed, relaxed, eased.

Steeped in pleasure, she allowed herself to sink into a dreamlike state.

His touch unlocked a million tiny nerve endings, arousing even while it calmed. With exquisite patience he kissed, caressed, touched, allowing her to set her own pace. With soft words and gentle sighs he eased her tension and calmed her fears until she could trust him to lead her to the next step.

He sensed the change in her and thrilled to it. It wasn't surrender. In all his fantasies about her, he had never been tempted by mere surrender. It was something far more vital to him.

With his eyes on hers he began undressing her. He had to curb the urge to tear her dress from her. But she still needed tenderness.

He unfastened the row of tiny buttons that ran from her neck to her waist, one button at a time. When he slid the gown from her shoulders, he bent to brush his lips across her naked shoulder.

He felt the tremor that rocked her and brought his fingers to the ribbons of her chemise. As the last filmy barrier fell away, he was free

to see the body he had only glimpsed before.

She was so beautiful. And more perfect than he had ever dreamed.

He felt his heart thundering as she reached for the buttons of his shirt and slipped it from his shoulders. When her fingers faltered at the fasteners at his waist, he helped her, until his clothes had been tossed aside with hers.

They knelt facing each other on the fur, feeling the cushion of soft hay move and shift beneath them. Though the wind raged outside, heat poured from their skin as they came together.

His fingers tangled in her hair as he drew her head back and covered her mouth in a savage kiss. For a moment she stiffened, feeling a flash of fear at the change in him. Then the fear was swept away by her own newly awakened passion.

She brought her arms around his waist and felt his muscles contract violently at the first touch of her fingers. With a moan he took the kiss deeper, and his hands moved over her, enticing, arousing.

So this was why he had tried to send her away. This was why he had struggled so long to keep his distance. This was the secret he had held so long. This smoldering passion, this dark, brooding all-consuming sensuality that now struggled to be free.

This dark side of him excited her. Exulting in her power, she brought her lips across his shoulder and down his chest. His low groan made her even bolder. With lips and fin-

gertips she explored his body as he had explored hers.

His body hummed with need. He had wanted to go slowly, to allow her to set the pace. But now, with her own passion unleashed, he was finally free. It was no longer enough to want to please her, to satisfy her. He wanted to show her so much more.

This was what he would give her. More than a taste—a feast. More than a moment's pleasure—a night filled with every delight.

With excruciating tenderness he laid her down and brought his lips to her breast, moving his tongue across her nipple until it hardened. With exquisite care he moved to the other, feasting on her breasts, slowly, patiently, until she writhed and moaned and clutched at the fur beneath her.

The cold night air whispered over her flesh, and still her lungs were clogged with the heat that rose between them, around them, as he drove her higher, keeping release just out of her reach.

Lizzy had slipped into a world of touch and taste and feel, where thought no longer existed. There was only Cody. He tasted of wind-swept mountains and tobacco, and faintly of whiskey. The feel of his rough, work-hardened fingers on her flesh was more heavenly than the feel of silk or satin.

She shuddered against him as he slid along her body, damp flesh to damp flesh, and brought his lips to her throat.

He had thought he was teaching

her, taking her, but he was the one being led. From the first touch of her he had been imprisoned by needs so primitive they cried out for release. He struggled to hold back his needs, to draw out the moment.

He felt her stiffen as he brought his mouth down her body. But at the exquisite pleasure, bordering on pain, she forgot her fears. And then she gasped as she reached the first crest. He gave her no time to recover before he moved over her, tracing his lips upward until they found hers.

Her lids snapped open. He saw her eyes, dark with passion. It wasn't possible to want more. But she did. His name was torn from her lips as he entered her. Her deeper arousal startled both of them as she wrapped herself around him, wanting to hold him like this forever.

He filled himself with her, breathing in the clean, fresh taste that would always be hers alone.

He whispered her name, or thought he did, as his mouth closed over hers and he raced toward the edge of madness.

And then she was moving with him, climbing toward a distant peak. And as their bodies shuddered, she felt them both break free and begin to soar. It was the most incredible journey of their lives.

THEY LAY, still joined, their breathing slowly returning to normal. He thought he might be too heavy for her, but he couldn't muster the energy to lift himself from

her. Besides, she felt so good, so right, here in his arms.

He rolled onto his side, cradling her to his chest. She clung to him, loving the way it felt to hear his strong, steady heartbeat against her ear.

She was silent for such a long time he thought she had fallen asleep. He pressed a kiss to her temple and was surprised when her hands moved along his shoulder and down his chest. She felt the raised scar that ran along his side to just beneath his rib cage.

As her fingertips traced it, she sat up suddenly, and her voice was low with passion. "I can't bear that you were wounded in the war."

"Wounds heal, Lizzy. Even hearts, I've learned. And life goes on."

"Oh, Cody. Why are you here, all alone on this mountain?"

He was silent for a long moment, and Lizzy thought he would refuse to answer. She'd had no right to ask such a personal question.

In an oddly unemotional voice, he said, "I spent the last year of the war as a prisoner of war, with hundreds of wounded and dying men."

She licked lips that had suddenly gone dry. "Where?"

"Andersonville."

He had been held prisoner in her own home state. She had heard about the condition of the prison camp. So many men hadn't survived.

"And when I got home," he said simply, "I found more death. My wife and son, my reason for living,

were gone. I couldn't be around people anymore, Lizzy. I just had to find someplace clean and untouched by the madness."

"Oh, Cody." The love she felt for him was so deep. If she could, she would erase all the pain from his life. But she couldn't speak the words. And so she could only show him.

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CODY STUDIED the woman who slept so peacefully in his arms. She would never know what a gift she had given him. It wasn't just the touch of her, though it had been a long time since he had been touched like this. And it wasn't just her soft, sultry voice, though he loved listening to her. Her voice reminded him of those long-ago dinners at his grandmother's fine big house. A voice that belonged to lush, velvet ball gowns and French perfume.

No, it wasn't her touch or her voice alone. It was her goodness, her tenderness, her generous spirit. These few hours with Lizzy had healed him. It was as though all the wounds had never happened. What was more important, his shattered heart had mended, as well.

She stirred and he waited, heart pounding, for that moment when her eyes would open and she would realize that their night together was over.

Her lids flickered and he saw the instant recognition. His heart stopped beating. He forgot to breathe.

Like a contented, lazy cat, she stretched and wrapped her arms around his neck, dragging his face close for a slow, lingering kiss.

"Mmm." She smiled and snuggled closer. "I just had the nicest dream."

"Want to tell me about it?"

She laughed, a warm, rich sound that wrapped itself around his heart like a hug. "Words wouldn't do it justice. But I suppose I could show you."

"Was I in your dream?"

"Oh, yes. You were doing something like this." She pressed her lips to his throat and began running hot, moist kisses across his collarbone.

Cody tried not to squirm, but it was impossible beneath such an assault. His voice was warm with a mixture of passion and laughter. "Did you like it?"

"Oh, it was all right."

"Just all right?"

"Yes. But then you did this..." She brought her lips across his chest, stopping occasionally to nip with her teeth or tickle with her tongue.

His hand fisted in her hair, and he tried to drag her head up, but she continued teasing him.

"This dream is getting serious." His blood was already pounding in his temples. He felt as if he'd just chased an entire herd of mustangs on foot. Grasping her by the shoulders, he muttered, "How did this dream of yours end?"

"It didn't. I woke up just as you..." She moved her head lower and heard him moan.

She was still laughing when he rolled her over and pressed his mouth to hers. "Now let me tell you about my dream."

Her laughter died, replaced by a soft sigh as he took her. Slowly, deliberately, he drew out all the pleasures they had shared through the long, glorious night. And while dawn light began to touch the mountaintops with a pale, pink glow, they slipped into a world of whispered words and murmured phrases. A world of intense feeling. A world of love.

AMOS SPENT the day making the final repairs on the wagon. All day long the sound of hammering filled the air as he fitted sturdy new sides to the wagon bed.

With every blow of the hammer, Lizzy felt a blow to her heart. Against her will she was being drawn toward the one terrible, painful thing she had begun to dread—her final parting from Cody.

For Cody, the daylight hours of this last day together seemed to drag on forever. By the time the final chores were finished and he made his way to the cabin for supper, the need for her had become a slow, simmering fire deep inside him.

After supper he worked on mending his saddle. But while he worked, he watched Lizzy wash and dry the dishes and clean off the table. He felt a tug at his heartstrings when she knelt beside James and heard his prayers.

When she was finished, she

crossed to where Cody was working and hung the lantern on a peg just over his shoulder, allowing the light to fall on his work. Without a word he smiled his thanks, and she responded with a smile of her own.

Though no words passed between them, they were able to communicate with their hearts.

The minutes ticked away, feeling like hours. And at last, with a yawn, Amos set his pipe on the mantel and kicked off his boots.

"I'll turn in now. You'd better do the same. We'll want to get an early start in the morning. Good night, Lizzy. Cody," he called.

Cody glanced at Lizzy. If she knew what he was thinking, she would surely blush.

Oh, the things he wanted to tell her. But he knew he never would. And the things he yearned to share with her. But he would keep his secrets safely locked in his heart. Tonight, on this, their last night together, there would be little time for words. Tonight he would try, as only a fool could, to hold the morning at bay.

CODY PULLED on his jacket and walked to the barn. Scant minutes later he looked up to see Lizzy lean her weight against the door.

As she hurried toward him, he raced halfway to meet her, his arms opened wide. With a half laugh, half sob, she danced into his arms and felt herself being lifted in the air. As he slowly lowered her, she slid along his lean, hard body and

waited, waited, with a hunger that nearly drove her mad, until their lips mated.

Her hands dug into his hair as he held her and kissed her, slowly, thoroughly, like a man starved for the taste of her lips.

Without a word he carried her to the nest of furs he'd prepared in a bed of fresh hay. Still kissing her, he lowered her to the fur and nearly tore her dress in his haste. Her movements were equally frantic as she fumbled with his buttons and tugged his shirt from his shoulders.

Their kisses were hot, urgent, their hands almost bruising in their intensity. The silence of the night was filled with sighs and moans as they struggled to pour a lifetime of love into a single night. Though neither of them spoke, each knew what the other was thinking as they came together in a frenzy that left them both shaken.

CODY AWOKE with a start and realized at once that the place beside him was empty. Cursing himself for having dozed, he glanced around the barn, expecting to see Lizzy washing herself by the basin of water. She wasn't there.

He knew then that she had wisely decided to avoid the pain of parting. This way, they would bid a final public farewell in the presence of the others. What words, after all, could they say that would make the parting easier? Still, he felt the sharp pain of regret. He'd wanted, needed these last private moments with her.

"I GUESS that's the last of it."

Amos checked the wagon, then turned to James. "Go fetch your sisters, boy."

James found Lizzy standing just inside the door to the cabin, staring around as if memorizing every square inch. Sara Jean was swaddling tiny Jobeth in a blanket.

"What are you doing, Lizzy?"

"Nothing." Wrapping her shawl around her shoulders, she took a deep breath and followed the others out to the porch.

Cody was shaking hands with Amos. Both men turned as she approached.

"Got everything, girl?"

"Yes, Grandpop," Lizzy said quietly.

"Then let's get started. I want to make Commencement by night-fall." He pulled himself up to the wagon seat and picked up the reins.

"Goodbye, Cody," Lizzy whispered. "Thank you for—everything."

He was glad she didn't offer her hand. It wouldn't have been possible to take that small hand in his and not drag her against him and beg her to stay.

She turned away and accepted her grandfather's steadying hand as she pulled herself to the wagon seat.

The uncomfortable silence was broken by the sound of hoofbeats thundering across the meadow. As a horse came into view, Cody picked up his rifle.

"Cody Martin?" the rider called when he was close enough to see the rifle pointed at him.

"Yes."

"My name's Owen North. Anna Purdy sent me from Commencement to inform you that the stagecoach came back late last night."

Cody and Sara Jean together sighed with relief. And then the boy added the words both had most dreaded.

"The driver and guard didn't return with it."

BY THE TIME Owen North had been given a quick meal, Cody had saddled his horse and affixed a blanket behind, then rushed to the barn. Leaving enough food and water for his animals for several days, he secured the barn and returned to the cabin.

"Come on, Beau," he said sternly to the dog.

Immediately Beau set up a wild yelping.

"Looks like I'll be riding with you as far as Commencement," he announced.

IT WAS DARK long before they reached Commencement. When they crested a hill, Owen North reined in his mount and pointed.

"There's the town." His voice held a note of pride.

"Those lights look mighty inviting," Amos said with a sigh.

They drew up in front of the sheriff's office and waited while Cody went inside. Scant minutes later he returned. By the grim look on his face they knew that the news hadn't been good.

"Still no sign of him?" Amos called.

Cody shook his head. "Come on. I'll accompany you to Mrs. Purdy's."

Anna Purdy's house was the last one in a line of houses just beyond the town. It stood far enough from the road to escape the dust and dirt spewed by horses' hooves and wagon wheels. Clean, fresh snow frosted the roof and windowpanes. Lantern light glowed behind the frilly curtains at the windows.

Cody dismounted and helped the others from the wagon. His hands lingered a moment at Lizzy's waist before he released her. She was so clean and warm, and more than ever he wished he could accept the solace offered in her eyes.

At the sound of the wagon the door was thrown open, and Anna hurried out onto the porch.

Cody had hung back while the others hurried up in greeting. Now he stepped forward. "I'm going to look for Ned."

"Well, come inside first," Anna said. "There's a pot of stew and a whole platter of biscuits just waiting for hungry travelers." As she held the door for the others, she noticed Cody turn away. "Cody?" She was puzzled. "Aren't you coming?"

"No, ma'am. I just wanted to see the Spooners safely to your place. I can't stay here and fill my stomach while my brother's out there somewhere. It's time I started searching for him. Too many hours have already been wasted."

"Do you have any idea where he

might be?" Sara Jean's voice trembled.

"No. But the sheriff mapped out the route they were supposed to take with the stagecoach. All I can do is follow the same trail." He turned away and pulled himself into the saddle.

BY THE LIGHT of the moon Cody knelt and studied the tracks in the snow. The thing about a snowstorm was, it tended to keep people indoors, warm and dry. So the only people who ventured out had compelling reasons. The way he figured it, any people following the trail of the stagecoach probably knew about the gold shipment and decided even a snowstorm wasn't going to keep them from getting rich.

He counted four horses. One of them had a distinctive circular groove in his right front hoof.

It looked like Whit had found a new band of gunmen ready to follow his lead.

With a chilling sense of foreboding, Cody hunched into his parka and urged his horse into a run.

ON A FAR RIDGE Cody saw a sudden blur of color. As he watched, a man darted from tree to tree, inching toward a cabin.

Peering through the snow, Cody made out the forms of several horsemen standing in the shelter of a row of trees. He knew that they were poised to attack whoever had taken shelter in that pitiful shack. Ned, he thought.

The men on the far ridge hadn't spotted him yet. That gave him the advantage of surprise. He tied his mount to a tree. Dropping to his stomach, he began to crawl through the snow toward the cabin.

As he crawled under snow-laden branches, he tried not to imagine what he might find. The thought of his brother lying bloodied flitted through his mind.

When he reached the wall of the cabin, he crawled alongside until he found an opening. Shimmying through, he found himself staring into the muzzle of a rifle.

"Cody," Ned spoke his name on a rush of air he'd been holding. "Why didn't you announce yourself? I almost pulled this trigger."

"Thank God you're alive," Cody got to his feet and thought about pulling his brother close for a hug. But there was no time. There was never time.

"You've got company coming," Cody motioned toward the other wall. "Spotted a man sneaking among the trees. He's got three friends waiting up on the ridge."

Just then Cody noticed a man lying in the shelter of two sagging walls. Ned had wrapped his jacket around the man and was doing his best to stay warm in only a thin shirt. The remains of a fire smoldered in a crumbling fireplace. But it wasn't enough to heat the frosty air that poured through the shattered walls.

Seeing the direction of his gaze, Ned said, "That's Roy Waters, the driver of the stagecoach. When he

keeled over, I had no choice but to stay with him. He fell clear out of the stage and landed on his head. I leapt out to save him. I was hoping the stage might make it back to town and alert someone that we were out on the trail."

Cody had to admire his brother's courage. Not many men would give up their only chance for safety and shelter to stay with a dying stranger. But Ned had always cared about all men. However, at the moment, there was something more pressing than admiring Ned's virtues.

"Can he hold a gun?"

Ned shook his head.

"Then it looks like it's up to you and me. Those gunmen out there aren't going to wait."

What might have been a massacre ended without a scuffle. The four gunmen dropped their weapons and were easily subdued when they faced Ned's and Cody's guns.

A SHORT TIME later, the four gunmen, hands securely tied, sat astride their horses while Ned and Cody lifted the wounded driver onto Cody's horse and wrapped him in Cody's furs.

"All right," Cody said, turning to his brother. "Now, where's the gold?"

Ned smiled. "We weren't carrying the gold shipment on the stage. I suggested that we send the gold ahead with a shipment of goods from North's Mercantile."

Cody studied his brother with re-

spect. "It was a fine idea. So your stagecoach was empty?"

"That's right."

"And you risked your life for nothing?"

Stung by his words, Ned said defensively, "We had to take the stage on its usual route. Otherwise the plan wouldn't have worked. Besides, I wouldn't say it was for nothing. We did catch four criminals."

Cody grabbed his brother by the front of the shirt and dragged him close. He thought about what had almost happened, and his words were harsher than he intended. "You damned fool. You'd risk your life for a shipment of gold? Or worse, for a decoy?" His eyes narrowed and his words sliced like a razor. "You have no business here, Ned. This is no life for you."

Pushing away from him, Ned's hands fisted. "And who are you to tell me about the life I'm leading? Look at you." His voice shook with fury.

"At least I know what I am. I'm not trying to be something I can't be." Seeing his brother's fists, Cody lifted his own. "Come on, Ned. Do you want to fight me? Would that make you feel better?"

A moan from the man on Cody's horse had them both dropping their hands. With a sheepish look, Ned said, "I can't believe I'd put my own anger ahead of Roy's safety. We'd better get him back to town."

"LOOK," JAMES called. "It's Ned and Cody."

Everyone spilled out of Mrs. Purdy's front door, watching as the two hitched their horses and stomped through the snow to the front porch.

"Oh, Ned, I just knew your brother would find you," Sara Jean shouted, running down the steps to greet them.

Ned's frown eased a little at the sight of her. But only a little. "I didn't need my big brother to come and save my neck. I was doing just fine without him."

"I didn't mean..." Sara Jean bit her lip. "I'm just so glad you're back." She caught his hand and led him up the steps.

"I've got supper going," Anna Purdy called from the doorway. "Don't either of you men think about leaving until you've joined us. You can tell us all about your adventure while you eat."

"SO YOU WEREN'T carrying the gold after all?" Amos said between bites of the finest chicken and dumplings he'd ever tasted.

There was a real linen tablecloth on the table, and fine china and crystal, as well as candles in silver candlesticks.

"No, sir. And we were never really in any trouble. That is," Ned added sheepishly, "until Whit and his men tracked us to that cabin."

"It's a good thing Cody found you first." Sara Jean shot Cody a grateful smile.

Ned ducked his head and took a long time to butter a roll. Now that

his temper was cooling, he was beginning to feel sorry for the way he'd reacted to Cody's help.

"Yeah," Ned said softly. "It's a good thing." It was the closest he'd come to acknowledging Cody's help.

Across the table, Cody sat in silence. The thought of nearly coming to blows with his brother still rankled.

Everyone looked up at a loud knock on the door. Anna Purdy hurried to answer it. A moment later she trailed behind a man in a fine black suit and hat.

Ned jumped to his feet. "Mr. Wetherby." Remembering his manners, he said to the others, "This is the owner of the stage line."

When the man finished shaking hands with Amos and Cody, Ned asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? No, Ned. Something is very right. Everyone in town is talking about what you did. In fact, I'd like to give you this bonus, Ned."

Ned seemed about to refuse when the man pressed a handful of bills into his palm. "Thank you, Ned. I wish I had more brave men like you." He turned to Anna Purdy. "I'm sorry for interrupting your supper, ma'am. I'll just go out now and join the others in the street."

He nodded to everyone at the table, then followed Mrs. Purdy to the front door.

When she returned, she was beaming with pride. "Can you imagine? Everyone in town is talking about the men at my supper table."

The others seemed startled when Cody scraped back his chair. "Thanks for supper, ma'am."

"You're leaving? But you've hardly touched your meal."

"I have a long ride ahead of me."

"But it's late. Why don't you spend the night?"

"I've left my animals alone long enough."

Lizzy felt as if her heart had just been trampled. He was leaving. Without a word to her. Without a word to any of them.

No one spoke as Cody's footsteps sounded across the porch and down the steps.

James pushed away from the table and rushed to the window to watch as Cody pulled himself into the saddle.

Lizzy pretended to fetch her little brother. But it was only an excuse to stand beside him and watch.

As Cody turned his horse and started down the wide lane, a voice, loud and taunting, broke the stillness.

"Cody Martin." The words were slightly slurred. "I hear you're the Yankee who thinks he's so fast with a gun."

There was muffled laughter, and then another loud voice shouted, "Let's see if this Yankee hero can stand up to a couple of real men."

Cody sat very still, deliberately keeping his hand away from the gun at his waist. His rifle was in a boot alongside the saddle. There was no way he could slip it out without being seen.

He felt the icy trickle of sweat

along his spine, which he always experienced in battle. Only a fool wouldn't be afraid of facing a madman with a gun. In this case, four madmen.

From the sound of their voices he knew that the men were liquored up and spoiling for a fight. Of course, none of them would be willing to face him alone.

Slowly he turned his mount until he was facing the men. They stood in a semicircle, their faces shadowed by wide-brimmed hats.

One of them was older than Amos. He spat a wad of tobacco and said, "It was some cowardly Yankee who burned my shed."

"Maybe it was him, Pa."

Cody turned his head to study the young man who had spoken.

"Got no use for Yankees," spat another. "We came here to get away from them. Let's keep this town pure."

The other muttered their agreement.

"I say we kill him. Fair and square." One man stepped forward, and Cody recognized the taunting voice as the first one who'd called him out. "You draw, Yankee."

"Just you and me?" Cody's voice was low, dangerous as he climbed from the saddle.

The man stepped back a pace and glanced left and right to make certain that the others were still with him. "Hell, no. You're the hero, remember? You got to outdraw all of us."

"You call that fair and square?"

"As fair as any Yankee deserves."

They all laughed nervously.

The taunting voice hardened. "We've wasted enough time. You draw now, or we'll shoot you any way."

A voice, low and menacing, behind him, caught Cody by surprise. "You're going to have to shoot this Reb, too."

The men whirled.

One of them called, "We got no fight with Rebs."

"You fight my brother, you fight me." Ned strode beyond the circle of men to stand beside Cody.

"Now just a minute..."

"No. No more time." Ned's voice was cold and flat. "My brother and I fought on different sides of the war because we each believed in a cause. But that can never change the way we feel about each other. I love Cody. I'll stand against any man who threatens him. And if I have to, I'll die beside him."

Ned stunned the onlookers by tossing his rifle into the snow at his feet. "But I won't fight back. You'll have to gun down an unarmed man. I'm through with guns and fighting."

While the men were still trying to decide whether or not to shoot an unarmed man, Amos strode into the circle, holding his rifle.

"Name's Amos Spooner of Georgia," he said with pride. "I gave my land and my only son for the Confederacy. But if I have to die, I'll by God die beside two of the finest men I've ever met." His voice swelled

like a tent preacher's. "And I'll tell you something else. Unless this town, and this whole country, learns that we aren't Yankee and Reb anymore, but just plain men, we won't be worth the powder it takes to blow us all to the hereafter."

The crowd began to mutter among themselves.

Stirred by his words, Mr. Wetherby stepped forward, holding a small black pistol in his hand. "Well said, Mr. Spooner. I salute you." He turned toward the others who had stood on the fringe of the crowd. "Well, folks, what do you say? Is this a town of Yankee and Reb, or a town of honest, honorable men seeking a better life?"

Owen North stepped forward, followed by a man who could only be his father. They carried identical rifles; wore identical frowns, on handsome, square-jawed faces.

"I want my son to grow up in a town of honorable men," Mr. North said. "That's why we named this place Commencement. After seeing this land we love torn apart by war, this was our chance for a new beginning."

Soon, all the men in the town stood on either side of Cody and Ned.

The leader of the four who had taunted them lowered his rifle. "Looks like we made a mistake."

"A big mistake," the sheriff shouted, racing along the street after having been roused from his office by one of the townspeople. "Go home now," he called, "and sleep

it off. But I'll expect the four of you in my office in the morning."

For a moment, while the others watched in puzzlement, the two brothers merely grinned at each other. Then they fell into each other's arms and embraced.

"Do you think we could go back inside and have dessert now?" Anna asked.

"Depends," Amos said, bursting with relief now that the tension was ended. "What did you make?"

"Baked apples with sugar and heavy cream. And there's apple cider to warm us."

"Woman, you sure do know how to spoil a man."

The others needed no coaxing to hurry indoors.

When they were once again seated around the table, Ned surprised everyone by saying, "If you don't mind, I'd like to offer a prayer."

While the other bowed their heads, Cody glanced across the table and watched as his brother closed his eyes and murmured, "Thank You for bringing us all to this place. I guess we needed to be reminded that when we lose our way in the darkness, Your path is there."

The others glanced up, puzzled by his words. But when Ned glanced at Cody, the two men merely smiled.

"So you've found your way?" Cody muttered.

"Yes. And so will you."

"Whatever are you talking about, Ned, Martin?" Sara Jean checked her sleeping infant and took the seat beside him.

Ned realized that the others at the table deserved an explanation.

"When the war broke out, I had just finished my education. But I decided that, because of the suffering of those around me, I had no right to follow my heart until all men were free to follow theirs."

He refused Mrs. Purdy's offer of cider and sipped strong, hot coffee. Glancing up, he said, "Now, I think, after following so many twisted trails, the Lord led me to Commencement." He turned to Anna Purdy. "You said the people were hoping for a preacher?"

She nodded.

"I'm a graduate of divinity school." He felt a swell of pride and humility as he admitted aloud for the first time, "I'm an ordained minister."

AS THE OTHERS left the room, Lizzy started after them. Cody placed a hand on her arm to stop her.

Startled by his touch, she waited, refusing to meet his eyes.

He stood behind her, staring at her bowed head. In the light of the candles her hair was the color of flame.

"I have to leave now, Lizzy. But before I say goodbye to the others, I wanted to say goodbye to you here, alone."

Her head came up slowly and she half turned. She was afraid to look at him, afraid he would read too much emotion in her eyes.

"I'm glad you and Ned have made peace, Cody."

"I am, too." But it wasn't Ned he wanted to talk about. "You realize that I have to go back now. I can't wait until you leave in the morning, even though I wish we could have this last night together." He'd give anything, anything for one last night in her arms. "The mustangs, the mare and her foal, need me."

"I understand."

She started to walk away, and he caught her by the wrist.

He felt a terrible sense of frustration. Why, when she was being so damnably understanding, did he feel so miserable?

"I have no choice, Lizzy, but to go."

"I know, Cody."

Just then James came bursting into the room and skidded to a halt as Lizzy and Cody stepped apart.

Lizzy took a deep breath to calm her heart. "What is it, James?"

"Grandpop says we're not leaving in the morning."

"But I thought..."

"Remember when you said that Christmas comes even way out here?"

Lizzy nodded.

"Mrs. Purdy says tomorrow is Christmas Eve. And she says every year, Commencement has a dance on Christmas Eve. And Grandpop just said we were going to stay for the dance. Isn't that great, Lizzy?"

"Yes." Christmas Eve. It didn't seem possible. With all that had happened, she had lost track of time.

She glanced at Cody and swallowed back a wave of pain at the

thought of him alone on his mountain while everyone else was celebrating at a festive dance.

"Can you come to the dance, Cody?" James asked.

Cody struggled to keep his tone flat. "I don't see how I can, son. I'll be riding half the night just to make it back to my cabin. I'd have to start out again by noon, if I wanted to be here in time. That wouldn't leave much time for my chores."

"But you could do it, Cody." The little boy was embarrassed by the tears that sprang to his eyes. He wiped them away with the backs of his hands. "I know you could."

Feeling calmer now, Cody knelt and touched a hand to the boy's shoulder. "I don't like to make promises I might not be able to keep, James. But I'll tell you this. I'll try to come back."

James met his look and sniffed back his tears. Lizzy always said Christmas was a time of magic.

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THERE WAS a quiet, expectant hush in the air as Commencement awoke on Christmas Eve morning.

All day the townspeople buzzed with the news that a preacher was in their midst.

Shortly after breakfast, Mr. Wetherby and the sheriff paid a call on Mrs. Purdy's star boarder.

"We haven't much to offer you," Mr. Wetherby said solemnly. "Without a church, the best we can do is the back room of North's Mercantile."

Ned smiled. "The Lord was born in a humble place, Mr. Wetherby. But He promised us that wherever two or more are gathered in His name, He'll be among us. I don't think He'd be offended by the back room of North's Mercantile."

Their relief was evident on their faces.

"As soon as the snows melt, we'll start building a real church," the sheriff said. "And a parsonage for you, if you'll agree to stay on as pastor."

"I'd be honored," Ned said.

The men offered their handshakes, then hurried off to tell the townsfolk about their agreement.

As snowflakes danced past the window, Anna Purdy and Lizzy locked themselves in the kitchen, indulging in an orgy of cooking and baking. Lizzy refused to look at the snow. That would be an admission that another storm was blowing in. A storm that would prevent Cody from returning to town for the dance. A storm that would prevent him from seeing her one last time before she was forced to move on.

CODY AWOKE in the loft and lay a minute, listening to the wind whistle around the roof. He sat up, pressing a hand to his back. The ride to the cabin had been long and cold. And though he'd started a fire, it must have gone out.

He climbed down the ladder and shivered as he waited for the kindling to catch fire. A short time later he ate a meal of cold meat and bis-

cuits, washed down by bitter coffee, and started his morning chores.

The mare was glad to see him. As he rubbed her nose, he laughed aloud at the antics of the foal.

He mucked out the stalls and spread straw, then filled the troughs with food and water and headed out to the corral. When the mustangs had been fed and watered, he bent to the task he had set for himself.

He was a fool, he thought, as he smoothed and shaped the wood and fitted the metal pieces he'd bartered from the blacksmith. What he ought to do was forget his honor and his foolish sense of pride and beg Lizzy to stay.

He thought of the Spooners. With a new baby, Sara Jean certainly couldn't be much help on a journey to California. And Amos wouldn't admit it, but his energy was flagging along with his eyesight. Hell, he thought angrily. Who was he kidding? The only one who'd get them all the way to California was Lizzy.

When he stepped from the barn hours later, he was surprised to see that darkness had descended early. And with it, another blizzard.

It was just as well, he consoled himself as he made his way to the cabin for his supper. Now the decision had been taken out of his hands. He would get no more chances to see the Spooners before they left Commencement. And someday, if he was lucky, Lizzy would become just a dim memory.

ANNA PURDY HAD produced a round wooden tub, which she set up in a

corner of the kitchen. When it was filled with warm water, she and Sara Jean and Lizzy took turns bathing.

Lizzy thought she'd never felt anything so wonderful as she dipped a cup into the water and let it flow over her hair. She had forgotten the luxury of warm water, soap and a steamy room.

Wrapped in towels and sheets, the three women then turned the kitchen over to Amos and James, while they hurried up the stairs to Anna's big bedroom.

They took turns combing each other's hair and fussing with fancy hairstyles. With strips of torn rags Lizzy coaxed Sara Jean's fine blond hair into fat ringlets held back from her face with pretty blue ribbons.

The two sisters combed Anna's long, white hair and plaited it into a neat braid, which they twisted around her head like a coronet.

When Sara Jean and Anna began fussing over Lizzy's hair, she felt a sudden sharp, searing pain around her heart as a vision of Cody brushing her hair slipped unbidden into her mind.

"Hold still," Sara Jean commanded. "Lizzy, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing." She took a deep breath and forced the image aside.

"Oh, Lizzy," Anna sighed. "It would be a shame to hide this hair in a simple knot. You must wear it long and loose tonight." She had a sudden thought. "And I have the perfect combs." Rummaging through her bureau, she turned with

a triumphant smile. "These were my mother's."

"I couldn't wear these, Anna," Lizzy protested. "They're far too lovely."

"But you must," Sara Jean whispered. "They'll be so perfect with the dress I made you."

"Dress?" Lizzy was mystified.

Sara Jean hurried across the hall to her room and returned with a long, green velvet gown.

"But this was destroyed in the fire," Lizzy said; her eyes wide with disbelief.

"I salvaged it," Sara Jean admitted. "Along with several other gowns I thought I might be able to sell." She brought a second gown from behind her back.

Lizzy caught her breath at the midnight blue gown. "That was Ma's."

Sara Jean nodded. "I made it over to fit me."

"And you kept it a secret all this time?"

Sara Jean blushed and stared at the floor. "I know I haven't been much help on this journey. You had to do the work for both of us. But I thought, after I had the baby and we found a new home, that I could set up a little business making over other women's clothes."

"If this is an example of your work," Anna said, "you could certainly please every woman in Commencement."

When they were all ready, Anna drew the two young women into her embrace, and whispered, "You'll never know what this has meant to

me. I feel like the Lord has suddenly blessed me with two wonderful daughters. And a little granddaughter." She laughed, picking up Jobeth from the middle of the big bed.

With Anna cradling the baby, the three women made their way downstairs to the parlor. Amos and Ned, wearing dark frock coats, turned from the window where they had been carrying on an earnest conversation.

"Oh, my" was all Amos could manage to say when he caught sight of Anna and his two granddaughters.

"Sara Jean." Ned started forward, then seemed to catch himself. "All of you ladies look lovely."

Lizzy glanced at her sister, whose cheeks were bright with two round spots of color.

"Here, Lizzy," Anna said. "You hold Jobeth while I fetch some elderberry wine. Amos, I think this calls for a celebration. Would you like to help?"

As the two headed for the kitchen, Lizzy caught sight of James standing in the doorway.

"Why, James, don't you look fine."

The little boy looked uncomfortable in his long-sleeved white shirt of fine lawn and a pair of short pants. "Mrs. Purdy said these once belonged to her son." He tugged on the shorts and nearly stumbled in the stiff, high-topped shoes.

Lizzy swallowed her laughter. She figured it wouldn't do to tell him how adorable he looked.

Soon Anna and Amos returned

with a tray of crystal glasses and a bottle of dark wine.

"I haven't tasted this wine since my husband passed on," Anna said, offering a glass to each of them. "But I want you to know what it's meant to me to have you folks here. This big old house has never felt more like a home than it does to-night."

WHILE AMOS brought the wagon around, the others went to the kitchen, where a table was piled with trays of food wrapped in linens.

The street was crowded with carts and wagons and sleighs. From miles around people came for the rare opportunity to eat and dance and visit with neighbors.

Though she knew better, Lizzy found herself scanning the horses for a glimpse of Cody's mount. She warned herself not to allow the disappointment to spoil her evening. When she saw that Cody's horse was not at the hitching rail, she scolded herself for such foolishness. Snow hung like a thick veil over the countryside. This fresh snowfall would add hours to an already difficult journey.

Inside the back room of the mercantile, Anna Purdy knew everyone. And everyone knew about her guests. While they clucked over the new baby and fussed over Amos's fine family, their greatest enthusiasm and their greatest curiosity was reserved for Ned Martin.

Ned was especially pleased to see

the stagecoach driver, Roy Waters, sitting beside Doc Simms.

"I've been waiting to thank you," Roy Waters said loudly, causing heads to turn.

The two men shook hands and Roy added, "I never thought I'd live to see another day. And here I am at the Christmas dance."

Lizzy, cradling little Jobeth in her arms, watched as the men and women soon moved along the tables groaning under the weight of the food. And though she knew it would only cause more disappointment, she found herself studying every tall figure for the one she most wanted to see.

A bearded gentleman picked up a fiddle. A plump lady played a guitar with one string missing. A thin young boy began to play a mouth organ.

As soon as the music started, couples moved onto the floor. Lizzy tapped her toes and smiled as Amos and Anna moved easily to the music. It was plain that Grandpop's knee wasn't paining him. At least, for tonight.

Ned bowed before Sara Jean and led her to the dance floor. When he took her in his arms and began to move with her, the look on her face said more than any words.

Halfway through the evening, Sara Jean took a squalling Jobeth to a quiet corner where she could feed her. Relieved of her burden for the moment, Lizzy walked to the table and accepted a cup of punch.

James had made friends with a boy and girl who looked to be close

in age to him. The boy was a head taller and not at all shy. The girl, with long glossy dark curls and a sweet smile, trailed James like a shadow.

When the music started up again James hurried over to Lizzy. "Will you dance with me?"

She couldn't help but smile at his sweet gesture. "Of course I will."

Placing her left hand on his shoulder and her right hand in his, she moved with him in a slow circular pattern around the floor.

"Do you think Cody will come to the dance?" James asked.

"No, James." Lizzy tried to keep her smile in place. She hadn't expected it to hurt this much. "It's just too far for Cody to ride."

"But he said he'd try."

"And you know he would if he could. But with this new storm..."

At the look on her little brother's face she stopped. "James, what's wrong?"

"It's..." He swallowed, unable to speak.

Concerned, Lizzy turned. And found herself staring into the dark, piercing eyes of Cody Martin.

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LIZZY WONDERED how her heart could beat this fast and not leap clear out of her throat.

"You look—different." She wanted to add how handsome he looked, but she couldn't find the words.

He had shaved his beard. Now, for the first time, she could see the firm

chin, the perfectly chiseled nose, the slightly sensuous lips. If he had been ruggedly handsome before, he was now even more so.

His dark, perfectly tailored jacket and pants would have been suitable for any important big-city gala. Here in Commencement, he was the best-dressed man in the room, attesting to the fact that he had once lived the life of a wealthy gentleman.

"And you look—beautiful." She was so dazzling she took his breath away. But he had never been a man of words. He'd always left such things to his younger brother.

He studied the way her hair fell forward over one shoulder and spilled down the bodice of the green velvet gown. Glints of green sparkled in her eyes.

The couples swirled around them, but they stood, staring at each other, unable to move, unable to hear the music.

"I thought—with the snow..." All the things she was thinking, all the things she was feeling, churned inside her. But all that came out were a few babbling phrases. "I didn't expect to see you tonight."

"When I saw the snow, I didn't plan on coming. But I knew it would be our last chance..." He opened his arms as if awakening from a deep sleep. "Lizzy, will you dance with me?"

She moved into his arms and had to fight a desire to weep. Though she had tried so hard to deny it, this was all she ever wanted.

Together they began to circle the floor.

"I was afraid you wouldn't know me without my beard."

Tentatively she touched a finger to his clean-shaven chin. "I would know you anywhere."

At her touch he felt a slow, simmering flame begin to flicker along his spine. All day he'd felt so alone, so empty. And now, holding her, touching her, he was alive again.

This was what had driven him to leave the warmth of his cabin and brave the blizzard. This one last chance to be with her, to hear her voice, to bask in the warmth of her smile.

"THIS WILL BE the last dance, folks."

As the fiddler began to play a slow waltz, Cody caught Lizzy's hand and whirled her onto the dance floor. But before they had taken more than five steps, he waltzed her through a darkened doorway. When her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she was surprised to find that they were in the mercantile, standing between a shelf loaded with bolts of fabric and a shelf lined with jars of food.

"Cody, we're missing the last dance."

"No, we aren't." He gathered her close and began to move, slowly, slowly, his lips pressed to her temple.

She felt a tiny ribbon of pleasure curl along her spine at the intimacy of their setting. Or was it the nearness of him?

"I'm glad you came to the dance, Cody."

"I couldn't stay away. Lord knows I tried. But I had to come."

"You tried—" she pushed a little away, so that she could see his face "—to stay away?"

He was frowning.

With an angry hiss he drew her close again and began to move to the music.

Once more she pushed away. "Cody?"

"Let it go, Lizzy." His voice was low, angry.

"I don't understand."

"There's nothing to understand. I didn't want to come tonight. I thought we'd both be better off if we didn't have to put ourselves through this again."

"I see." She started to turn away.

He caught her roughly by the arm. "No, you don't see."

She lifted her head and met his gaze. "Why did you come then?"

"I decided that, no matter what the pain later, I needed to see you this one last time." He brought both hands to her shoulders and dragged her close. Lowering his mouth to hers, he muttered against her lips, "To have this last taste of you to carry with me."

His spoke of hunger and need as his lips devoured her. He had thought of nothing but Lizzy on the long ride through treacherous snowbanks. And now that she was here in his arms, he felt half-crazy with the need for her.

"Lizzy, how I've missed you." He held her a little away, allowing his gaze to burn over her. Was this the ragged little waif he'd rescued from wolves?

He dragged her close and covered her mouth in a searing kiss. When he ran moist kisses along her throat, she

sighed and arched herself in his arms. She had dabbed rose water at her throat, and the fragrance was intoxicating.

The mercantile was dark, with only a thin sliver of light drifting through the doorway. Moonlight slanted in through the front windows.

When he looked at her, she seemed touched by magic. His hands roamed over her shoulders, and his fingertips moved from the lush velvet to the smooth texture of her skin.

Intrigued, he slipped his fingers beneath the fabric and found heat. He felt her fingers tighten at his shoulders and knew that she was as aroused as he.

He captured her mouth again and dived into the kiss, trying to tell her all the things he could never say.

With sighs and soft moans they moved together, needing fulfillment, seeking release.

"Dear Lizzy, I love you," he muttered against her lips. "I will always love you."

She thought her heart would explode with happiness. He loved her. And though he had not asked her to stay with him, it would have to be enough to sustain her for a lifetime.

She touched a hand to his face and committed every craggy line, every curve to memory. "And I love you, Cody."

They heard the rush of footsteps, the rustling of skirts, a moment before a tiny, feminine voice broke the stillness.

"James, I know you're hiding in here. Come on, our wagon's leaving. My papa's waiting."

A small figure in a dainty gown darted through the darkened doorway and nearly collided with the couple standing in the shadows. The little girl skidded to a halt then backed up.

"I was playing hide-and-seek with James and Robbie. I—I found Robbie, and I thought James might be in here."

Before either of them could speak, she turned and fled.

With the moment shattered, Lizzy took a step back, smoothing her skirts as she did.

Cody clenched his hands at his sides and struggled to calm his ragged breathing.

For the first time they became aware of what was going on in the next room. The sounds of the crowd grew louder as women sought wraps and men stomped outside to load empty dishes and sleeping babies into wagons.

"Grandpop will be waiting for me." Lizzy was surprised at how difficult it was to speak. She glanced up, meeting his dark eyes. "Will you ride with us as far as Mrs. Purdy's?"

It wasn't possible to face the final parting yet. Without a word he nodded.

Being careful not to touch, they walked slowly into the other room and forced themselves to say all the right things as friends and neighbors bade them good-night.

Cody watched as Lizzy picked up her shawl and followed her grandfather and sister to their wagon.

Lizzy was achingly aware of Cody as he pulled himself into the saddle and waited stiffly beside his brother's

mount, while Ned took a moment to speak to each family that was leaving.

Neither of them was aware of the little boy who slunk out of his hiding place among the shelves of the mercantile. With his arms around Beau's neck, he gave the dog a quick hug, then climbed into the wagon and drew a fur robe around his trembling shoulders.

"IT'S PAST midnight," Amos said, checking his pocket watch.

"That means it's Christmas." Sara Jean's eyes glowed as she stared down at the tiny bundle in her arms. "Your first Christmas, Jobeth."

"You're coming in, Cody," Anna Purdy said firmly. "You missed supper and the food at the dance, as well. But you're not missing all the wonderful things Lizzy and I baked today."

"Can I taste them, too?" James asked.

Lizzy realized it was the first time she'd heard him speak in hours. But then, she'd been too busy dancing with Cody to notice her little brother.

"Of course," Amos said. "Didn't you hear, boy? It's Christmas. This is a special time. You can stay up as late as you please and sample all your sister's fine cookies."

Lizzy and Anna hurried to the kitchen. While Lizzy made coffee and arranged cakes and cookies on a platter, Anna set glasses and a bottle of wine on a silver tray.

Sara Jean carried Jobeth upstairs to her bedroom. Ned trailed behind, carrying the cradle.

When he placed the cradle in the corner of the room, she laid the baby down. Ned handed her the blanket, and together they tucked it around the sleeping infant.

As they stood together gazing at the tiny figure, Sara Jean felt Ned's arm slip around her shoulders. It seemed so right, so natural, as though they'd always stood like this, gazing down at the baby.

Ned took a deep breath. "I know it hasn't been so long since you lost your husband, Sara Jean. And there are those who think it's only right and proper for a woman to grieve for at least a year. So if you think I'm speaking out of turn, just tell me and I'll apologize."

She waited, feeling her heart begin to race.

When she made no protest, he said, "I don't have anything. No home, no money. And if the good people of Commencement don't want me to stay, I'll be forced to move on until I find another town looking for a minister, because I've decided that's what I have to be. There'll be no more turning my back on my calling. And I know I'm presuming a whole lot by asking..."

In her whole life, Sara Jean had never had an ounce of patience. But though these few moments were the longest of her life, she forced herself to remain silent.

"Sara Jean, I'll always do the best I can for you and Jobeth, and I swear I'll love her like my own, if only you'll say that—that you'll marry me."

Laughing and crying, Sara Jean

threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Ned. Oh, Ned," she began. But the rest of the words were lost as she hugged him fiercely.

"Does that mean I can go downstairs and ask your grandfather for your hand?" he whispered against her temple.

"Yes. Oh, yes." She moaned with pleasure as he finally brought his lips to hers.

AMOS CLEARED his throat. Several times. "I have some very happy news."

Anna looked up from the candle she was lighting. James, rolling around on the floor with Beau, sat up. Lizzy entered the room carrying a platter of goodies and set them on a table, then gave him her attention.

"Ned has asked for Sara Jean's hand in marriage."

There was an audible gasp from Anna, who almost burned her fingers.

Lizzy raced across the room and hugged her sister. "Oh, Sara Jean, I'm so happy for you."

Cody glanced toward his brother, standing beside Sara Jean. The two of them shared secret smiles. Then he glanced at Lizzy. She looked so right in her velvet gown, in an elegant, genteel house, surrounded by beautiful things. Whatever temptation he felt to carry her off to his mountaintop was swept away by the knowledge that, like her sister, this was the sort of life she deserved.

"THAT WAS a fine meal, Anna." Cody drained his cup. "But I suppose

I'd better get started if I'm going to get back to my cabin in time to get my horses fed."

"It seems a shame that you won't be here for your brother's first Christmas service. Especially since it will also be his wedding day."

Cody ignored the shaft of pain that twisted in his heart. He was good at ignoring pain. He'd been doing it a long time now.

"It can't be helped. I have no one to see to the animals when I leave." He turned to Amos, carefully avoiding Lizzy. "I brought a present. It's for the whole family. I hid it behind the shed."

He strode from the house and was gone for so long the others had begun to twitch with anticipation. Then at last, hearing the sound of sleigh bells, they rushed to the door.

He had hitched their horse to a brand-new sleigh.

"But we can't accept," Amos protested. "You should keep it to haul lumber down the mountain."

"I'll make another one. But you need it more than I do. I started worrying about you traveling in that old wagon. You still have a long way to go in snow before you reach California. And I hated the thought of Lizzy...of all of you," he corrected, "trying to dig those wheels out of snowdrifts."

Amos walked slowly around the sleigh, running his hands over the smooth wood. "You do mighty fine work, Cody. If you decide not to breed horses, you can always earn your keep by working with wood."

"Thank you, sir." Cody glanced at

Amos's gnarled old hands. One day his hands would be as leathery as those. Old and alone, with nothing to show for his life. Not children. Not grandchildren. Not Lizzy. The thought hurt more than he cared to admit.

Lizzy studied the man who stood beside her grandfather. How many hours had Cody slaved over that wood to make a gift from the heart?

Amos shot a quick glance at Lizzy and James. And though he said nothing, his look spoke volumes. He expected them to show the proper gratitude.

"Thank you, Cody," Lizzy began, feeling as if her heart was shattering into a million pieces. "That was kind of you."

"Well, James?" Amos challenged. "Don't you have something to say to Cody?"

The little boy hung his head and dropped a hand on Beau's neck.

"It's all right, Amos," Cody said quickly.

He walked to where his horse stood saddled and waiting, wishing he could have found a private moment with Lizzy. "It's time I took my leave." He pulled himself into the saddle and tried not to look at her. It would be too painful. "I wish you all a safe journey. I hope you find your heart's desire in California."

James glanced at Lizzy's face and saw the tear that squeezed from the corner of her eye and rolled down her cheek.

The little boy knew that his beloved sister had just lost all hope, and he wanted desperately to bring a smile

to her face. It nearly broke his heart to see her cry.

He lifted his head, searching the heavens for a miracle. Lizzy had said that if you could find the Christmas star, you could ask for a miracle. But there were so many stars winking down at him. And then he spotted it, brighter than all the others. This time he wouldn't ask for anything for himself. This time his request was purely unselfish. His lips moved in simple prayer.

As Cody wheeled his mount and started down the lane, James swallowed hard and dug for courage.

"Cody." His high little voice was nearly carried away by the sigh of the wind, but he saw Cody turn his head. Cupping his hands to his mouth, he shouted, "Cody, wait."

Cody reined in his mount and turned in the saddle.

The others could only watch as the little boy jumped off the porch and began running after his horse.

"What is it, James?"

The little boy struggled to find the words. Defiantly he shouted, "I was in the mercantile. I know about you and Lizzy."

Except for a narrowing of his eyes, Cody showed no emotion.

Lizzy felt the others staring at her as she started down the steps, then stopped and lowered her head.

Cody slipped from the saddle. This was too important a discussion not to speak face-to-face. Kneeling so that his eyes were level with the boy's, he said softly, "You heard what I said to Lizzy?"

The little boy lifted his head and

met Cody's look. "Yes, sir. You love her. And she loves you."

Amos made a move to interrupt his grandson but Anna caught his arm. "Don't, Amos."

"But the boy..."

She shook her head.

"So why are you sending her away?" James demanded.

"I'm not sending her away."

"You gave us a sleigh."

"To make your journey safer. It's because I love her that I want to keep her safe."

"If you really love her, why don't you ask her to stay here with you?"

"I have nothing to offer a woman as fine as Lizzy, son. Look around you. Look at Anna's house. This is where Lizzy belongs. How can I ask her to share a life of hardship in the wilderness?"

"You should at least ask."

"Then what would become of your grandfather?" Cody touched a hand to James's shoulder, but the little boy pulled away, determined to remain defiant. "Without Lizzy, how could your grandfather ever realize his dream of reaching California?"

Hearing that, Amos felt a tug at his heartstrings. Was it possible that Cody was actually sacrificing his own love because of an old man's dream?

"About California." Amos cleared his throat and glanced nervously at Anna, who was standing beside him. "I've been thinking that Commencement is a fine little town. A good place for a man to put down roots and start a new life."

Anna turned to stare at him with

wide, shining eyes. "Are you saying you'll stay, Amos?"

"I might. That is, I'd like to. If you wouldn't think me an old fool."

She lifted a hand to his weathered cheek. "It was my fondest wish."

He caught her hand in his and their fingers laced as they turned to study Cody and the little boy.

"So," James prodded, "are you going to ask her?"

"You really think I have a chance?"

"She loves you," the little boy said firmly. "I heard her tell you. And she was really happy in your cabin." His voice lowered wistfully. "Who wouldn't be, with wild horses running right past the barn, and the prettiest little mare and foal in the world waiting for you every morning?"

"You make it sound like heaven, son."

"Yes, sir. I guess it is."

Cody stood, and though his words were directed at the little boy beside him, his gaze fastened on the woman who stood a little apart from the others. "If I was to ask her, and she agreed, would you be willing to come and live with us? After all, she is like your mother. Oh, I know I could never take your father's place," he added quickly, "but I'd do my best to be like a father to you."

James looked across to his sister and felt his heart nearly explode with longing. "Will you, Lizzy? Will you marry Cody and take me with you to live in his cabin?"

Lizzy knew that tears were streaming down her cheeks, but she couldn't stop them.

Lifting her skirts, she raced the distance that separated them and flew into Cody's arms. With her lips pressed to his throat she murmured, "That's just about the most unromantic proposal I've ever heard."

"I warned you I wasn't much good with words."

"You don't have to be. James just said them for you."

The little boy dropped to the ground and buried his face in Beau's neck. It might be all right for Lizzy to cry happy tears, but it wouldn't do for anyone to see him crying.

Years from now he would be able to recall this moment with exact clarity. And no one would ever be able to convince him that it wasn't the hand of God that had touched him, giving him the courage he needed to confront Cody.

"I guess we'll be having three weddings at the Christmas service instead of one." Ned's voice was warm with laughter. "I think it's safe to say this is one Christmas the town of Commencement is never going to forget."

"I know it's one I'll never want to forget." Cody drew Lizzy into his embrace and stared into her eyes. "I love you, Lizzy Spooner. And I can't imagine spending another night without you."

"Then you'll have your wish. It

will be morning soon. And we can be married at the Christmas service."

"You won't mind living in a rough cabin miles from your family?"

She gave him a smile that melted the last of his fears. "I thought maybe we could get started on a family of our own. Do you think you could build an addition to the cabin?"

"I'll get started on it as soon as we get back."

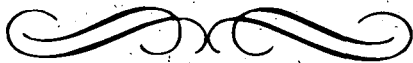
"The addition?"

"The family," he growled against her ear.

With a laugh she flung her arms around his neck and he lifted her high in the air. Overhead, one star, brighter than all the others, winked in a black velvet sky. It was the dawn of Christmas, a time of magic.

Slowly, slowly, he lowered her until her lips met his. With a sigh she fitted against him as if made for him alone.

She had set out hoping only to find a safe haven in a world gone mad. Instead she had found so much more. A family that had learned they could withstand anything, as long as they stood together. A land of primitive beauty. A rugged man who touched her heart as no other man ever could. And a love to last a lifetime and beyond. Christmas was truly a time of miracles.



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STAR SIGNS—NOVEMBER & DECEMBER



ARIES March 23-April 22

If you are not happy in your present circumstances don't blame it on others but try to change things for yourself. A social gathering brings some new friends and some exciting events into your personal life.



TAURUS April 23-May 22

Try to find time to be with your family, as you could hear something to your advantage. A job offer boosts your ego, but take care that this is the direction you really want to move.



GEMINI May 23-June 21

Your outlook on life seems to be changing this month and you should feel more confident about yourself and your future. A romantic evening midmonth sets your heart fluttering.



CANCER June 22-July 22

Someone from your past re-enters your life and causes a few ripples, and you may feel lonely. However, a true friend will be there to help you understand your feelings.



LEO July 23-August 22

Positive thinking really can make positive things happen, so concentrate your mind to help resolve areas of difficulty and you will be able to change your life for the better.



VIRGO August 23-September 22

Don't allow minor limitations to spoil what should be a period of growth and success. A new romance late in the month brings that sparkle back into your life.

STAR SIGNS (continued)



LIBRA September 23-October 22

You could find yourself becoming an agony aunt, as it seems everyone has a problem to share with you, so finding time for yourself will be important. A short break away would be very beneficial.



SCORPIO October 23-November 22

A close relationship could prove frustrating, but try not to over-react, as you will only make the problems worse. News from midmonth may find you making plans for a trip abroad.



SAGITTARIUS November 23-December 22

Good news connected to finances will help improve your stress levels and start you planning a more stable future. A friend needs help, but take care not to give more than you can afford.



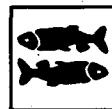
CAPRICORN December 23-January 22

Try taking it a little easier and you will still be able to achieve all you want. Holiday plans made now will prove a great success, especially with that special person.



AQUARIUS January 23-February 22

Major gains are just waiting to be made in those areas of your life that appeal to you most. Career moves are looking especially favorable, and now may be the time when you can realize a long-held ambition.



PISCES February 23-March 22

Follow your instincts and you won't go far wrong. You are in a very positive position to achieve whatever you desire. A family event brings some interesting news.

READER'S CORNER CROSSWORD #45

ACROSS

1. Large boats
5. Employ
8. In the distance
12. Color slightly
13. "The Flying _____"
14. Gentleman
15. Smell
16. Alternative to coffee
17. Spoken
18. Acapulco's country
20. Awkward
22. Chum
23. Twice five
24. Rise
27. Agree upon, as price
31. Halloween word
32. Atmosphere
33. Finale
37. Cloak's partner
40. Ocean
41. Self
42. Taken unlawfully
45. Student's assignment
49. Father
50. Female deer
52. Aching
53. Forewarning
54. Headgear
55. Concept
56. Care for
57. Eisenhower's nickname

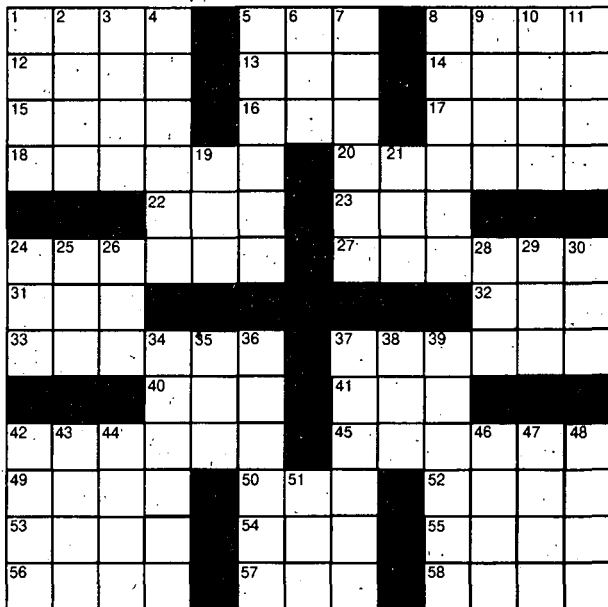
58. Gone by

DOWN

1. Small particle
2. Take the bus
3. Golden fort?
4. Narrow band
5. Not revealed
6. Take to court
7. Puts into law
8. Quantity
9. "Old MacDonald had a _____"
10. Word of regret
11. Depend
19. Is able to
21. Majors or Marvin
24. Actor Vigoda
25. Child
26. Food fish
28. Label
29. Falsehood
30. To _____ is human
34. Bermuda or Jamaica, e.g.
35. Maiden name word
36. Indian leader
37. Take out
38. Period of time
39. Tattle
42. Stain

43. Docile
44. _____ sesame
46. Carbonated beverage
47. Mine finds
48. Tidy
51. Hard wood

Solution on page 71 of this issue.



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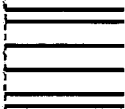
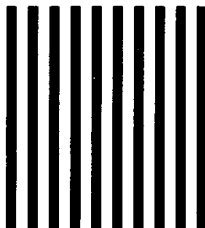
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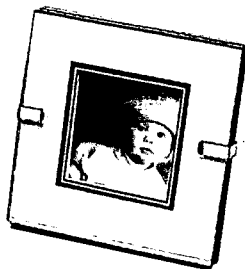
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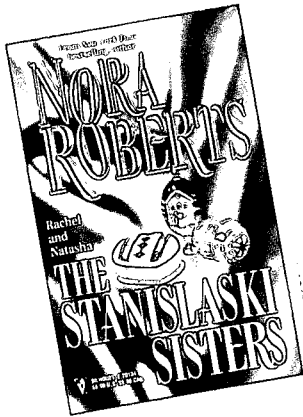
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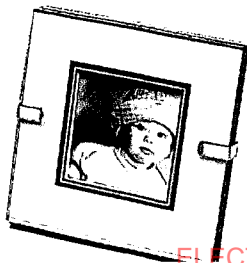
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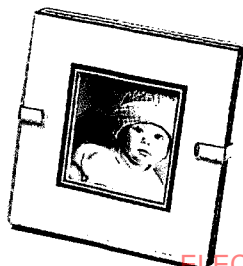
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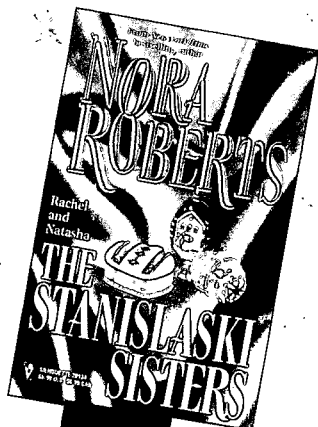
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